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# GLOBAL EVOLUTION

BOOK 01

*Dog Bite*

EPUB CREATION BY LISA HAYES

# Global Evolution

(全球进化)

by

**Dog Bite**

(咬狗)

# Synopsis

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Cambrian Big Bang, now the largest life science puzzle...

500 million years ago, single-celled life on Earth suddenly occurred mutation similar to evolution, a variety of gorgeous creatures was born “out of the thin air”, all ancestors of today’s species appeared in that short period of time, each species were evolving at a lightning speed billion times faster than today, it was a brilliant era.

Unfortunately, the life of brilliant things are always short, after the brief “Cambrian”, life on Earth entered another 56 million years of evolutionary era at turtle speed. And humans, was also one step faster during the turtle race, and become the leader of life on Earth.

But now — a greater “second age” has come again.

During the lightning speed of evolution, humanity was kicked off of the throne on the food chain in the shortest time possible, and life on Earth, welcomed the second brilliant big bang.

The real end of the world, is no longer brainless zombies or desolate earth, but — the end of mankind, the whole earth’s paradise.

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# Chapter 1: Examination Results

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It was a hot summer when the college entrance examination results were released.

The examination results of 2014 didn't have many differences from those of previous years. Chang Liu checked his grade online the moment it was released—519 points. A grade like that would just get him into an average college. In a small town in northern China, such a standing was neither good nor bad. It wasn't worthy to show off, but wouldn't be made fun of either. It was ordinary, just like he was.

Seeing the result, Chang was not pleased or saddened. He quietly clicked the cross on the upper right corner of the web browser, then subsequently threw himself onto his bed.

Ring ring ring ...

The phone rang. Chang didn't even set any fancy ringtones like his peers would usually do; he was just a person as boring as his ringtone.

He saw that the call was from his mother as he answered.

“Hey son, I heard that you can check the results today. I just saw Wang's son from the convenience store. He got a score of.....”

“519 points.” Chang didn't wait for his mother to finish the

sentence, Chang emotionlessly reported his score, interrupting his mother's lecturing. Then, he casually said a few words, then hung up. Without a second thought, he turned off his phone.

July and August were just the hottest months of a year, and even though the room was cooled down by air conditioning, the heat seemed impossible to drive away. Tossing and turning on his bed, Chang couldn't fall asleep, so he got up and turned on his computer and watched a movie....

It seems like nothing could excite him; even the movie that he used to enjoy was now tedious for him to watch. "My life is monotonous and passionless," he thought. He muted the computer and started to stare at the stained ceiling. For a moment, he couldn't tell whether he was tired or just bored, and he eventually slowly fell asleep.

The sky was slightly dark when Chang was awakened by someone's footstep. In summer, there were more hours of daylight, so the slight darkness in the sky meant it was past 7 o'clock.

His parent came home from work. This meant that a family meeting was about to begin.

On the table.

"It won't be a problem for you to go to an average college with this grade, but what you can do in the future after graduating from there?" Apparently, Hua Wu, Chang's mother was very attentive

toward her son's education and knew the cutoff line for renowned universities before anyone else in the family.

“Your dad and I...we respect your decision. Tell us what you are thinking. Do you want to just go to an average college and be an ordinary person for the rest of your life, or do you want to repeat a year in high school to improve your grade so you can go to a prestigious university?”

“Any college is fine.” Chang had just taken a bite of broccoli, then he put down the chopsticks.

“Think about it carefully.” Hui Liu, Chang's father, waved his hand, and with that the meeting ended in silence.

Three days later.

“You know, our family has always been democratic. We never thought of interfering with your decisions and we respect your choice. But knowing the pressure in employment competition, being a graduate from an average college, you can imagine the difficulty in getting a job. Your dad and I aren't resourceful either....”

Hua kept mumbling, “Tell me, which one you would like to go for, repeat a year or go to any college that accepts you?”

“I told you, any college is...”

His mother interrupted, “Think about it again.”

.....

Two days later.

“The fact is, you have nothing to be afraid of when you’re young; few people are successful in their first attempt. You know that kid from our neighborhood? He’s 5 years older than you and didn’t get a good grade on his first try, so he repeated a year and ended up in a famous university. Now that he has graduated, jobs are hunting for him. What I mean is that the reality of this society is cruel, and having a diploma from a famous college will gain you access to everything. Think about it again, whether you want to repeat a year or go to a random college to...”

“I’ll go to any college.”

“Think about it again,” his mother sighed.

.....

The day after.

“Son, you may think that I’m being annoying, but sometimes a decision you make will determine the fate of your life. Whether it’s heaven or hell is a very thin line...”



“Mom, I want to repeat a year of high school!” Chang clenched his teeth, ending his mother’s rant.

“Well, well, well, this is what you said; we didn’t force you!” As if she didn’t understand her son’s current mood, Hua finally cracked a smile.

“You know, our family has always been democratic. Since you chose your own path, you need to study hard this year. In order to support your choice, we have contacted a boarding school for you. There are fewer students in each grade, so it’ll be less chaotic. We figure that the time you wasted on commuting to school could’ve been used to study. Since you chose to pursue this path, every second is important. Some students who’ve repeated high school already have a head start...”

.....

The next day, Chang packed his luggage, grabbed some utensils and a few sets of clothing and arrived in “Xing Zhi”, a small boarding school. As all the students there had repeated high school, their motivation to study was erased by the summer heat. After just 3 days, old habits were restored.

Three days was enough for the boarding students to get to know each other. After night class, Chang took a shower and laid on his bunk bed, chatting with his roommates.

“Hey, did you guys choose to repeat a year?” Chang said as he looked at the other three.

One man wore glasses and seemed like he never cared about his hygiene. His hair was always greasy. Most of the time, he held a thick book. Judging from his appearance, it looked like he was a hard working student, but apparently he went in the wrong direction – the book he read wasn't a textbook. So obviously, he didn't choose to come here.

“I'm not sure, I didn't even pass the examination. I wanted to go to a technical school or something, but my dad disagreed.” The man wearing glasses responded; his gaze never left his book.

“Hey, kid, what do you read every day then?” A voice came from the upper bed. Pangzi was a chubby man and also a fan of web fiction, but he didn't like whatever that man was reading.

“Apocalyptic fiction.”

“Come on, let me take a look,” Pangzi took the book away swiftly. Within a few glances he said, “Zombies again? Why does all apocalyptic fiction mention zombies? It's such a joke!”

Pangzi returned the glasses man's book while ranting.

“It's been more than 10 years since the release of the Resident Evil series, yet everyone still thinks that zombies are a key element of apocalyptic fiction. They have no creativity at all! If viruses aren't transmittable through the air, then zombies can't be considered a threat to humans.”

“Breathing heavily, walking slowly, mental retardation and those stupid ‘ah, ah’ sounds they make. For any normal human, it’s impossible to be bitten by such a creature. Think of our ancestors from ancient times. Facing all kind of predators who were way stronger and more flexible than humans, humankind still managed to thrive.”

“I’m not bragging, but even if all the students in our school turned into zombies one day, I could still run out of here safe and sound, you see what I mean?”

Pangzi shook his belly while talking.

The last person in the dorm interrupted Pangzi’s lecture as he got arrogant.

“In fact, the zombie theme didn’t originate from Resident Evil series, but rather from European Medieval Literature. In 1968, the American movie ‘Night of the Living Dead’ set the tone for apocalyptic novels and movies. The concept of killing zombies by shooting their heads and viruses being contagious through zombie bites...that movie basically proposed everything we know about zombies today.”

Tao explained calmly. Within the four of them, he was the only one with a good academic standing. Tao was really close to getting into Peking University, which was one of the best universities in the country. Unsurprisingly, not only was he good at studying, but he also had extensive knowledge in different disciplines. From

time to time, Tao loved to show off his mastery of all kinds of knowledge.

“Hence, the zombie theme has been boring ever since it was popularized four or five decades ago. And Pangzi, your opinion is correct; we don’t need to fear zombies. As long as they aren’t intelligent, their chances of being a threat to humans is infinitely close to zero.”

“Hey, I was asking whether or not you came here voluntarily. Stop changing the topic.” Chang interrupted the “good student” and brought the conversation back on track.

“Obviously no one came here voluntarily aside from me,” Tao concluded everything with a single sentence.

“Ah, these days, we never really get to make our own choices, even though our parents insist that they respect our decisions. From my viewpoint, it’d be better for me if they just said things straightforwardly.” Chang laid on the bed and recalled what happened a few days ago.

Right after he spoke, the door opened and a teacher wearing a pair of rimless glasses came in.

“Stop chitchatting and go to sleep, you have classes early in the morning.” He shut the door upon leaving the command, but his last statement snuck through the door, “In the history of evolution, small and medium sized predators who made heavy footsteps became extinct, not to mention those who moved slowly.

There's no significance in discussing this issue, so go sleep!"

## Chapter 2: Oxblood Fog

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The boarding students' morning began with no surprises. Since morning attendance was recorded, some students arrived to class at 6:30 AM.

At dawn that summer morning, Chang woke up with droopy eyes. He woke up the snoring Pangzi and Glasses who stayed up all night reading his novel. He slowly moved towards to the bathroom with his toiletries to wash up.

Being the good student, Tao had left way before the rest of them had even woken up. After putting on his school uniform, Chang left the dorm and stood in front of the gate. The hazy sky reflected in his eyes.

It was usually never foggy in summer mornings, but over the past two years, the fog had become normal. What was even stranger was that the fog had a constant tinge of pink.

However, if anything strange lasted for a long time, no one would pay attention to it over time. The weather forecast said it was a normal “cloud condensation nuclei” phenomenon. As long as the fog was harmless, normal people would care more about how to squish onto the crowded buses than anything else.

Walking across the campus, Chang's back disappeared in the fog, and his mouth and nose were overwhelmed with the sweetness of the fog.



He began studying when he arrived in the classroom.

Drowsy, groggy.

As morning passed, Chang didn't remember what he read, only that he was reading aloud. He felt that the life he was living was tedious and repetitive. Anyone living a monotonous life like his was the same as living the life of the walking dead.

Deep down in Chang's heart, he craved for change. He looked out the window and saw the pink fog as he finished his breakfast in a daze.

Like this, the first class had begun. It was biology class.

Beginning last year, Biology became a mandatory course in high school, regardless of the degree, whether it be art or science. The oddest part was that it became a primary course because the portion of this subject in the entrance examination was insanely large.

No one would've ever anticipated it, but the sudden policy made Biology a particularly important subject. Fortunately, Chang enjoyed studying Biology, so he paid extra attention to the first class.

"Today we will once again review some key chapters—ones you will definitely see in the college entrance examination—the Cambrian explosion. This concept has been on the exam for two

consecutive years, so it is worthwhile remembering everything about it.”

On the podium was the teacher who passed by Chang’s dorm last night. He was young and seemed kind, wearing black-rimmed glasses today. He didn’t talk much in the lecture, but he definitely talked about the most important things.

“The Cambrian explosion is one of the ten myths of modern science. Can the individual sitting next to the sleeping student please wake him up and tell him to explain to me the Cambrian explosion?”

The biology teacher pointed at the kid sitting beside Chang, so Chang woke up Glasses.

“The teacher’s asking you what happened in the Cambrian explosion.” Prodding Glasses with his elbow, Chang whispered the teacher’s question to his desk mate.

Still half-asleep, Glasses reluctantly stood up, adjusted and cleaned his glasses using his shirt, then murmured, “The Cambrian explosion probably happened hundreds of million years ago. It was a short and sudden evolutionary event. Evolution speed was hundreds of millions times faster during this event. According to my vague memory, there were no mammals or plants prior to this, but after that event, the species we know about today appeared on Earth for the first time.”

“Hundreds of millions of years ago? What has changed in species

morphology? These are key concepts. You also have to remember specific numbers of years.” The teacher waved his hands, allowing Glasses to sit down.

“While your summary wasn’t bad, pay attention to one thing in particular, the period of the Cambrian explosion. Not only did all species evolve at greater speeds, but new species were also born at unimaginable speeds. The ancestors of modern species all came from that period. Sponges, coelenterates, priapulida, lobopodia, brachiopods, molluscs, arthropods, echinoderms, chordates and more all evolved in that era.”

“Such amazing creatures! The Cambrian explosion is strong piece of evidence against Darwin’s theory of evolution, and Darwin himself had been wondering about too.”

“Sir, are you criticizing Darwinism?” A loud voice came from the corner of the classroom; it was Tao.

“Uh, yes, why not?” The teacher smiled and said, “Well, there are three levels of arguments: Hypothesis, Theory and Law. Darwin’s theory of evolution was just a theory, so why can’t I criticize it? You can certainly criticize a theory—even Darwin himself criticized his own theory.”

“Since we’ve discussed this, it wouldn’t be harmful to mention the reasons why the Cambrian explosion occurred.”

“The main stream academic notion for the Cambrian explosion is that the sudden abundance of free oxygen resulted in a large

number of species rapidly evolving. However, I think this argument is flawed. With only free oxygen, how could species evolve that much in a short period of time?”

While he was making his statement, the classroom darkened in seconds.

“What’s going on?” Chang looked out the window.

The fog outside the window became dense! That’s why it got dark. The pink fog didn’t dissipate, but rather grew thicker. The fog filled the entire world outside the building as if a giant piece of cotton had expanded in the air.

Perhaps it was because the fog was getting thicker, but for some reason, the pink fog now turned an oxblood red colour. Over time, the world turned bloody red at a noticeable pace. The sun was completely blocked and the whole world sunk into edgeless darkness.

More accurately speaking, with the oxblood red fog, the world now looked like a territory with patches of black and red scattered randomly.

The bizarre colours gave Chang the shivers. As he turned around, he realized that his classmates’ faces had become blurred in this black and red fog.

Usually if it is only darkness, some naughty kids would take the

opportunity to tease the girls, but no one would even dare to speak at this moment. Everyone has seen this world in darkness before, but never a bloody red colour.

Every student was deeply terrified. Their face explained everything, and the classroom was overwhelmed with silence.

“I’ll go to the office to see what’s going on.” In this solemn atmosphere, the biology teacher broke the silence.

He left with these words, and then his figure immediately disappeared into the redness.

“Look, the fog is sneaking through the seams of the doors and windows,” one student screamed. The fog was opaque; it was clearly visible to the students.

Glasses subconsciously covered his nose and mouth after seeing this scene.

“It shouldn’t be toxic, and even if it is, how long can you hold your breath?” Seeing the red fog drift in front of him, Chang sniffed. He noticed a strong scent of a fishy sweetness.

“Oh, it smells awful!” The classroom was now filled with complaints. After their initial shock, they all began discussing the strange phenomenon.

“What is THIS??”

“Bloody fog, I bet there must be a lot of car accidents out there.”

“The fog is so thick; I can’t see what happened out there!”

“Hey! Call your family!” Chang took the phone out of his pocket and dialed his mother’s phone number.

The response was a busy signal ———

“The phone call can’t be connected!” Chang stared at the strange fog and felt panic from his gut. “Is the fog blocking the signal?”

“I need to check out what’s going on!” A daring student stood up and walked to the door.

This attracted the attention of all the students. After he went out the door of the classroom, everyone flocked to the window to look at him.

The visibility was less than five meters outside the window, and when the daring student was only two steps away, his figure had already become obscured.

“Hey, don’t go too far! We can’t see you if you go further,” a friend of his faced the window and shouted.

“Oh! Okay, it’s really red out here, I can’t see anything. I can’t



even identify which room is the teacher's office," the daring student shouted back. His voice came through the fog, forming small ripples.

Then .....

As the daring student's response came from the other side of the hallway, further ripples tore apart the fog as a group of sparrows rushed towards the source of the sound.

Sounds of flapping wings—

A group of sparrows fearlessly crashed onto the daring student's cheek!

"Crack"

When the first sparrow made contact with the daring student, it made a strange noise as if a tomato was being smashed. A few more similar sounds were heard after that.

Chang turned his head and saw the daring student utter a shrill scream as his face was immediately pierced by the sparrows. More sparrows noticed the prey, and in less than a second, his whole face was ruined like a rotten watermelon.

"Help————"

The daring student scream desperately. he was pushed to the ground by these monster sparrows. However, his screams were very short, as if he choked on his own flesh and blood. He kneeled and finally fell on the ground, only emitting meaningless sounds. The normally timid sparrows began to peck the blood-soaked flesh as they heard the sounds.

The horrifying feeling paralyzed all the students in the classroom. No one was able to even move an inch. They'd never seen this scenario, not even in a horror movie.

A moment ago that student was still jumping around, but now he was crawling on the ground. The timid sparrows became completely bloodthirsty. At this moment, no one dared to go out and stop these monsters; rather, fear flooded the crowd and no one wanted to do so—not until those sparrows finished their “meal”, and until the daring student stopped twitching.

“Can someone please tell me what...has happened to this world?”  
The ashen-faced Glasses muttered.

# Chapter 3: The Crowbar And The Rat

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“How did these sparrows become such monsters?” Gazing at the gloomy bloody fog, Chang had a heavy heart.

“How is Saner?” The student who was shouting to the daring student ran out. He looked like he was a good friend of that daring student; they probably came from the same high school. Otherwise, no one would take the risk of running into that dense fog.

Unfortunately, the daring student died, and his blood smeared everywhere.

“I want to go home to see my parents, I don’t know what may have happened to them...” Looking at the mess weakly, Chang muttered to himself.

“You ‘d dare go into this fog?” Glasses didn’t seem to have recovered from the horrifying state.

“I have to go, even though it’s miserable.” Chang took out his cell phone and called his mother again—still a busy signal.

“Can you guys see if you can make a call with your phone?” Chang put his phone into his pocket and tried calling his parents using Glasses and another student’s phone. “I have to go home to see if my parents are okay,” Chang said after he found out the signal was completely blocked.

“Don’t go out, it’s dangerous,” Pangzi squeezed over and said.

“I have to, I’m worried about them.” Chang hesitated for a moment, then walked out of the classroom. Entering the fog, he found that it was denser than in the classroom. As if the fog was alive, it kept trying to get into Chang’s eye sockets. The whole world was full of bloody darkness, and without the sun, his visibility was less than 5 meters.

Chang wasn’t able to see anything three steps away, not even the main gate of the school. He could only focus on the brick floors, moving forward bit by bit by tracing their texture.

“Grass is growing out from the rock’s crevices.” Because he could only see his own feet, he particularly focused on everything within his visible range.

Chang noticed that between edges of the brick floors, grass was growing out. It wasn’t an illusion, but they were getting taller at a rate noticeable even by human eyes. With this speed, the sidewalk would soon become a meadow in less than an hour.

“What happened....?” Stepping on these tenacious grass, he carefully went all the way to the school gate and opened it. What welcomed him was more bloody darkness.

The sky and the horizon was connected seamlessly; the world is completely silent.

No car was honking, and no pedestrians were screaming. There was only some distant muffled sound. The strange fog seemed to be able to absorb sound waves, so sounds could only be heard within a certain range.

In this soundless bloody hell, Chang carefully sought for the direction towards his home, relying on his familiarity of the bluestone brick flooring.

A few meters away, he saw a car stopped in the middle of the street, but the driver was missing.

It wasn't a surprise; in this mysterious situation, the driver could only see from the cabin to the very front of the car, so there was no way anyone could drive forward in this fog.

Chang looked into the empty cabin and found some blood stains on the steering wheel. There were also dents on the door—obviously, they were signs of a scuffle. Just thinking of the danger that Saner encountered, Chang decided to look for a weapon to defend himself.

“Click”, the door was unlocked. Chang turned to a crowbar in the cabin—the kind of crowbar that would be used to change a tire. It was flat and pointy, sharp as a small shovel, round on one end, and had a half meter long solid iron bar.

Grabbing on the round end, Chang continued his way home. This was a small town in North China, so Chang's family wasn't far

away from the school. Usually 20 minutes was enough for him to walk home.

Walking alone on the sidewalk, it wasn't like the doomsday pictured in games and movies, where the world was lifeless. Instead, every few minutes Chang walked, he could see some small groups of people gathered. Some were on the streets, while some stayed in their yards; some were even brave enough to surround a corpse and try to figure out what was going on.

Every face was filled with doubt, uncertainty, and fear. Chang didn't join any of them. Communication had been cut off, including cell phones and TV signals, so he didn't know whether equipment with transmission lines were still functioning or not, but the entire radio transmission was definitely malfunctioning.

Carefully carrying a crowbar, Chang continued investigating forward. Unexpectedly, a homeless dog sprang in front of Chang with its crimson eyes and crushed teeth.

The dog stared at Chang, emitting a "whining" sound of threat.

Think of Saner's experience, Chang clenched the crowbar. He too, stared at the dog while keeping up his guard.

The two were stuck in the confrontation for a while. A moment later, the homeless dog seemed to recall its fear of human; it shook its head and tucked its tail, then ran away with deep whimpers.



“Ha.....” seeing the back of the dog, Chang was relieved. He continued to follow the brick floors while paying close attention to the movement around him as he slowly continued back home.

After about 15 minutes, he finally reached his house. Although the grass on the ground was about an inch tall, they didn't completely conceal the ground.

Chang's home was a house enclosed with a courtyard, and the yard was usually groomed neatly and tidily. But now standing at the doorway, Chang saw that the home he was familiar with had changed its appearance—the yard was covered with moss and the house was wrapped in ivy. Apparently, these plants with insanely strong vitality grew here.

In the yard, Chang ripped off some vines on the door handle and inserted the key to open the door.

“Mom, are you here?” He entered the house. The fog in the house was a lot thinner than outside, so Chang's eye felt a sudden discomfort as he had gotten used to the bloody darkness on the street.

He called, but no one answered.

“Dad, are you here?” He shouted. Again, there was no response.

The house was overwhelmed with a smothering silence. Chang had a bad feeling about this.

Walking inside the house for a while, he saw a pool of blood on the floor....and a finger.

That was his dad's finger. Living together for so many years, he knew his father extremely well, just like how anyone else knew their family members very well. It was an arched finger and was soaked in blood. Indeed, it belonged to his father.

“Dad!” seeing the smeared blood, Chang's heart shrunk, and he quickly rushed into the living room and rummaged around.

However, he couldn't find anything except for those blood stains on the furniture. There was no one in this house—until he discovered a huge rat chewing on a human finger.

“F\*\*k!” Seeing this cat-sized rat and what it is chewing on, Chang burst in anger. Chang kicked the desk heavily, scaring the rat and causing it to sneak out from under the bed.

It was fast; normally humans weren't able to catch a mouse with ease, not to mention a rat that was now the size of a cat. Its huge body didn't limit its footstep, but rather it helped it move further and faster.

Facing this creature, Chang wasn't able to keep his mind stable; there wasn't any fear in him, but rather an explosive anger and hatred.

Chang moved a step forward and smashed the rat with the crowbar.

Bam!

The tip of the crowbar hit the tiles, releasing a harsh sound. The moment he hit a small hole, the crowbar almost slipped from his hands due to the vibration.

The speedy and huge rat had already dodged to the side the moment it saw the crowbar aimed for it.

It didn't run away after it dodged. Instead, it "creaked" to Chang from where it was.

Chang calmed down slightly after the first hit, holding the crowbar with both hands, while confronting with this rat.

Whoosh!!!

This time, the rat attacked first. It turned into a gust of wind, aiming at Chang's feet with its wide open mouth and sharp teeth, biting onto Chang's ankle tendon.

Chang involuntarily dodged, but compared the speed of the rat, he was much slower. Although he managed to move his feet away, the rat still ripped off a small piece of flesh.

Upon ripping of that flesh, the rat was still not satisfied, so it made a turn and once again aimed for the ankle tendon.

“Ah!!!” Staggering under the pain, Chang raised and lashed the crowbar, directing it to the scalp to the rat.

Seeming to feel the threat of the crowbar, the rate stopped its second attack and dodged again.

But this time, Chang didn’t allow the rat to escape. The moment the rat ran between Chang’s legs, he stepped on its long tail, and then the crowbar pieced through the rat from the back since it was locked in place.

Creak!!!

The rat struggled vigorously, emitting a harsh and shrill scream.

Although the rat was strong, its size was still small compared to human. While Chang clenched the crowbar to ensure the rat stayed in place, he kicked on the head of the rat again and again. Every kick was violent and powerful, and accompanying them were numerous curses—“F\*\*k you!”

After dozens of curses, the rat stopped twitching and its whole body softened.

Chang kneeled and fell, as if he had used up every bit of his stamina.

Bam!

A crisp sound was heard as the crowbar fell to the ground as Chang loosened his hand.

Sitting on the floor and taking large breaths, Chang stood up again. He felt a crisp and burning pain from his ankle.

When humans were in an intense fight, their epinephrine accelerated. They often wouldn't be able to feel the pain until everything wrapped up.

His flesh was torn off about the size of half a finger long, and blood oozed out of it. This was the most severe wound he had ever gotten in his life.

As a teenage, fighting with others was usually an outlet for their anger from puberty, but no one actually wanted to kill one another. But in this battle, both he and the beast struck at each other fatally every time. Thus, this wound was deep.

## Chapter 4: Preparation

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Staggering a few steps, Chang endured the pain coming from his ankle and searched the house again, but no living person was found, there was only the one and a half fingers—half of one finger was bitten off by that rat.

Picking up those two fingers, Chang gazed at them with an empty heart. He sobbed inaudibly, but tears never came out of his eyes.

Unlike girls, guys always had a hard time venting their pain.

Fortunately, Chang stayed optimistic; he didn't believe that his parents dead. He walked into the kitchen and put the fingers in the sink. He rinsed off the blood and put them into his pocket. Then he turned away and walked into his bedroom. He turned on the computer to see whether the network was still connected.

Accompanied with the noise of his computer starting up, Chang clicked on the network connection – it was a success.

“So things still work, as long as they are connected with a direct line.” As he opened the browser, news was already all over the screen. Even the normal sidebar ads had all switched to broadcasting urgent news. It was flooded with an endless amount of news all about the “apocalypse”.

After clicking the news, there was an overwhelming amount of commentary and speculation in addition to the news.



Going through the three largest news sites, Chang quickly browsed all the news and commentary and subsequently summed up several important messages: first, the red fog had not only filled Kaifeng, the city he lived in, but rather the entire country and whole world was covered in the fog at almost the same time. Second, the fog blocked communication signals, including those from satellites and radios. Third, there were bizarre animal and plant mutation events, and as time passed, the number of mutations steadily increased.

And finally, the world sunk into panic.

Officials hadn't come forward and explained anything, so all that was known was from the distressing news, along with the events that some people had experienced.

It seemed that animals and plants had become bloodthirsty, and every species was filled with aggression. More precisely speaking, every species was competing for living space as if they living in terror of becoming extinct.

When Chang continued on searching for other news, the internet went down. At the same time, he was aware of an indistinct noise coming from the floor——

Looking down, Chang didn't know since when, but a massive amount of Rice hispa covered the floor. They seemed to come from the smell of blood, as they rushed to the living room and devoured the rat body and the pool of blood from Chang's father. The ones

that had a better sense of smell climbed towards Chang's wound, causing him to stand up without a second thought.

“F\*\*k!” he cursed. It was a natural reaction from being horrified. Chang shook his legs, then he heavily stepped on the Rice hispa after they fell off his leg.

Crack!

Chang felt a sharp pain from the sole of his feet, as if he had stepped on rocks. Those beetle were only wounded from his vigorous stepping. No one could imagine how sturdy their shiny black armour was. “If I were smaller, I’m afraid I couldn’t even injure them,” Chang thought.

“The house isn’t safe anymore.”

With beetles everywhere, it made him think of the aggressive scarabs from some science fiction novels. Although these insects currently looks far less aggressive than scarabs, under these red fog, it was impossible to tell how they would change by tomorrow.

Looking at the house, Liu Chang knew he couldn’t wait for his parents to come home any longer.

As for the cable breaking, it was caused by these beetles.

Going back to his bedroom, Chang took a pen and a stack of paper —“Mom, Dad, I am going to school, find me there.”

He wrote on three pieces of paper. One was posted on the bedroom door, one in the living room, and then he walked out the house and posted the last one on the patio door.

Outside the house was still surrounded by the smothering world of red fog.

Chang returned to the house after posting the last note.

Carefully picking up the blood stained crowbar from the swarm, he shook off some Rice hispa on the bar and walked into the kitchen.

Chang rinsed off the blood on the bar and his wound. After he disinfected the wound and wrapped it with a bandage, Chang considered what to do next.

There was no doubt that the apocalypse had come.

However, unlike what were written in novels, there were no revolting zombies nor wastelands from the aftermath of a nuclear war.

The world had sunk into a bloody darkness, and except for humans, other species didn't seem to have any problems surviving in the darkness. The situation was that human dominance on Earth had been challenged—as for food and shelter, they were still sufficient for now.

“Perhaps the end of the world didn’t happen overnight,” he thought. During the moment Chang was contemplating, the Rice hispa had doubled its size.

“Maybe the apocalypse is much worse than what was pictured in any fiction. It’s only a matter of time until everything wraps itself.”

Seeing these beetles with boundless vitality, Chang knew that he could no longer delay. He pulled out a giant backpack that he purchased few years ago and loaded it with food from the refrigerator, as well as a first aid kit and medicine. He also picked up a knife and put it in the side pocket of the backpack.

Soon, the backpack was stuffed and weighed more than 40 pounds. He couldn’t carry more or it would slow him down.

Finishing packing, he took a glimpse at some beetles that had climbed onto his feet, tracing the smell of blood. Chang shook off these beetles and realized, “The smell of blood might give me trouble.”

Thinking about this, Liu Chang turned back to his parents’ bedroom, he rummaged through the drawer and found a bottle of perfume, he sprayed it all over his body.

“I don’t know whether the fragrance can cover the smell of blood, but it should be unpleasant and pungent enough for other animals.” Chang in fact had no idea how well the fragrance would

work, but that was the only thing he could do now.

Chang double checked to ensure he didn't miss anything, then carried his backpack, crowbar in his right hand, knife inserted in the side pocket of the backpack, and left his home.

Nothing changed outside the house, but the bloody darkness hadn't dissipated. It grew even denser. Chang looked down, cautiously distinguishing a trace of the sidewalk. Familiar landmarks had become even more concealed, and the walls and houses on the roadside were covered with crazy growing vines. The ground was broken apart by the healthy and vigorous grass and the visibility was even less than three meters now.

It seemed that no matter what the circumstances were, the growth of plants were much faster than that of animals.

The speed of growth of the Rice hispa had astonished Chang, but in comparison to these plants he saw, the bugs were definitely less surprising.

# Chapter 5: Back To School

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The tarmac had become soft; Chang couldn't imagine the vitality of the seemingly weak grass for it to be able to penetrate the pavement. However, there wasn't any room for him to think too much about it. Walking along the eroded sidewalk step by step, Chang hoped that he wouldn't run into any danger.

He walked for about 10 minutes and noticed that there were less people on the street. He didn't know where they had hid. As he was thinking about this, a distant noise attracted his attention.

Despite the sound coming from far away, Chang knew that the red fog could greatly reduce noises and sounds. Hence, despite seeming to come from far away, it was probably much closer than he thought.

Chang anxiously looked around but the bloody fog blocked his vision. Within three meters of visibility, his eyes couldn't really collect much information about the scene. The first did that Chang did as an onlooker of this fight was to determine if they were humans or primates.

However, the second thing that Chang felt was to stay away from the scene. According to societal logic had taught him that being involved in the situation wouldn't be beneficial at all for him.

Hence, he slowly moved away from the source of the sound. Unfortunately, things almost never happened like one wanted to in this world—the sound of fighting rapidly approached him, and

finally, “pong”, a man fell out of the deep fog in front of Chang. It was a policeman who was covered in bruises and severely wounded.

Looking at this man, Chang ducked and carried his crowbar as he moved aside. Thankfully the fog was dense enough, so the policeman’s figure became blurry again despite only being two steps away.

Chang hid himself behind a car that was parked beside the road. He was extremely alert and carefully watched the situation over there. Just as Chang hid himself, on the other side of the fog, three shadows approached—there were three stray dogs. What was even worse was that Chang ran into one of them before when he found the crowbar.

However, looking into its eyes, the dog had already lost its previous fear to humans. Drooling through its teeth, it stared at the crawling policeman with crimson eyes.

The policeman struggled to stand up and carefully pulled out his gun.

The policeman seemed like he was an animal expert; although he was injured, he didn’t panic nor shoot aimlessly to scare off these dogs. Because the policeman knew how to deal with animals, he tried to avoid any intense body movements that could provoke an attack from them.

He kept his eyes on the dogs without any sign of relaxation as his

hands slowly moved to his waist, gently opening the holster. With his right hand, he unlocked the safety and raised his arm, then steadily pointed his gun at one of the stray dogs.

The moment the gun was pointed these dogs, their bestial instincts made them realize that the black hole they saw could threaten their lives. They launched a fierce attack without a second thought.

Bang!

Woof Woof!

The gun fired almost at the same time these beasts leaped. Among the three dogs, one got shot but the other two jumped over a distance of two meters and pounced on the policeman.

What followed were sounds of chomping, struggling and “whining.” Chang heard some desperate gunfire.

That wounded dog soon joined the group after the gunfire—the bullet didn’t put it down.

Though it was dim, Chang saw the blood ooze from its neck. Normally if a dog was shot on the neck, it would be considered lethal even if it didn’t hit the head or heart. The stray dog was still able to stand up and tear apart its prey. It was needless to say that the vitality of these stray dogs were no longer on the same level as Chang had known.



Realizing this, Chang stopped himself just as he was about to go and help the policeman—he couldn't even handle one of these dogs, and there were currently three. The policeman couldn't save himself even with a gun, so with only a broken knife and a crowbar, Chang was doomed to die if he tried to help.

Hence, for the second time in his life, he saw a living person gnawed by animals—the first time was Saner, the daring student. Under the attack of the three stray dogs, the policeman soon stopped crawling. Then, there was a nauseating sound of flesh being ripped off. It sounded pretty much like when a piece of fabric was being torn, but much worse.

The dogs started chewing on the policeman's bones. Chang was familiar with that noise as he used to have a pet dog too, but at this moment, he felt sick.

Chang was so afraid that he couldn't move. Luckily, he knew how sensitive a dog's ears were, so he suppressed his breathing as much as he could.

However, Chang had still underestimated those dogs' sensitivity. After they were sated, they immediately turned towards the location Chang was hiding.

It turned out that they discovered Chang's presence from the very beginning.

Tightly clenching the crowbar, his palm became sweaty from

intimidation. Summer was hot already, and at this moment, he was soaked in cold sweat.

He wanted to run as far away as he could, but his sanity told him to stay—whether it was a stray or pet dog, they all had the instinct to chase moving objects.

But most importantly, humans were generally unable to run faster than dogs. Therefore, trying to escape would 100% result in his death. Though confronting them would almost always guarantee his death, Chang still chose to stay there.

The three dogs converged and stopped a meter away from Chang with pairs of scarlet eyes.

Chang stood there as if he was a statue, suppressing himself in order to not reveal any frightened expressions on his face. His heart had never pounded so heavily when he saw blood dripping from their teeth.

Perhaps the stray dogs were full or something, but they appeared less aggressive and stared at Chang feebly. The leader dog sniffed and then sneezed; it was that pungent perfume. The leader immediately lost interest in Chang and left the scene with its tail wagging.

Seeing their leader withdraw, the other two dogs also disappeared into the fog.

“Oh my god...”

Chang heavily breathed as the danger left. He stretched his stiff body, then walked towards the corpse of the policeman.

## Chapter 6: The Food Chain

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The body was gnawed to the point of being unrecognizable; the policeman's face was completely gone. There was a large hole in his torso and his organs were all missing.

Looking at this nauseating scene, Chang tried his best to not to vomit as he picked up the pistol by the side of the corpse.

Like most students, this was the first time that Chang had ever touched a pistol. Luckily, it wasn't too complicated, so he only fumbled over the pistol for a minute or two before figuring out how to release the safety and use the magazine. He then fired the gun once—he wanted to make sure that he know how to fire before running into danger.

After the shot, Chang checked the clip and found out that there was only two bullets left.

Pistols used by the police were different from those used by military personnel. Service pistols were generally less powerful and had smaller ammunition capacity. Those pistols only carried six to seven bullets, and after that battle between the policeman and the stray dogs in addition to Chang's test shot, two bullets were all he had now.

Rummaging again through the humanoid body, Chang didn't harvest anything new.

However, he didn't expect much since many Chinese law

reinforcers weren't allowed to carry guns. Chang was lucky enough to obtain a firearm from this dead man.

Although this service pistol couldn't really cope with the unpredictable and dangerous situations in this new world, Chang took the pistol as precaution. Even if he had a submachine gun, it wouldn't help him that much considering his poor firearm skills and the miserable circumstances.

He roughly wiped off the blood on the pistol and locked the safety, then he put the pistol into his pocket and covered the smell of blood with the fragrance. Chang then went back to the school.

The instincts of social animal stated that they liked to gather together in perilous situations that they couldn't overcome by themselves.

Chang was no exception. After wandering about for 15 minutes, he finally reached the school gates.

At the school there was a soccer field.

It was crowded with a lot of people—most of them were middle aged men and women; they were probably parents that rushed here after the red fog began.

Xingzhi was a small boarding school only for students who planned to repeat high school, so there weren't many students and almost all of them were locals. The crowd almost filled the entire

campus.

Though the visibility was only about three meters, from the rustling and voices in the air, the crowd was very dense.

Chang even saw some old people in the crowd—they might've been some students' grandparents.

Holding a glimmer of hope, he squished into the crowd and tried find those two familiar figures. But after all the time he spent searching, he didn't see any sign of his parents.

Arriving back to his classroom, he found that it was still rowdy here.

“Hey Glasses.” In the classroom, Chang found one of his roommates, “Have you seen my mom?”

“What does your mother look like?” It had just been a few days in school, so Chang and Glasses were barely acquaintances. He hadn't had a chance to meet Chang's mother.

“Oh well, never mind.” Chang irritably stomped his feet, and then an itching pain came from his ankle wound. “Did anyone come to find me while I left?”

“Nope.” Glasses shook his head, “In the past hour, almost all the students' parents flooded over here. Some teachers tried using the broadcast system to organize the parents to meet their kids, but

somehow the broadcast malfunctioned, so the teachers couldn't even finish the announcement."

"It might've been destroyed by those bugs... the world is in chaos now." Chang sighed when he thought of the dangers he encountered on his way home and to school.

"Should we store some food?" Glasses read a lot of apocalyptic fictions, so he knew that food was always a scarce resource during the apocalypse.

"We definitely need food, but they won't last long." While Chang was talking, he turned to look outside the window, "It seems like food is sufficient. I saw a lot of plants growing outside on my way back, and most of them are edible."

"Things might've changed." As Chang and Glasses were discussing, the "good student" Tao joined their conversation. he stared at the red fog, "Although these plants look the same as they were before the red fog, they're growing much faster. How long has it been since the red fog first began? Less than 2 hours! Who knows whether these plants are going to mutate tomorrow or the day after, not to mention we have no idea how long the red fog is going to last. It's never too early to prepare food."

"You have a point," Chang nodded unconsciously.

Although the situation was unpredictable, Chang hadn't planned for the future yet, as his mind was occupied by other things. The safety of his family always came first in times of danger. Though

they were overprotective and constantly nagging him, at this moment, all he could think of was his parents.

The apocalypse was never one person's matter.

"What do we do now?" Glasses turned to Tao and said, "Where are your parents?"

"My parents work in Beijing; they can't come." Tao shook his head and glanced at Glasses' parent who were standing behind Glasses the whole time.

"The only thing we can do now is wait." Pangzi squeezed over. A middle-aged woman who was even chubbier than him had been with Pangzi the whole time; she was probably his mother.

"We don't know when and whether or not the fog is going to dissipate." Tao was still looking at the fog as he asked, "Chang, how was it out there?"

"It's very dangerous ....." Chang summarized his trip in a few sentences, "almost all the plants and animals I met had incredible mutations, and they continue to evolve at a steady pace."

"We saw the same when we came." Glasses' father interrupted, "I guess we have to wait for the army to rescue us."

"Will the army even come?" Chang looked at his three roommates as he asked this question, and the responses he got



were three pairs of eyes filled with uncertainty.

In every apocalypse film or novel, the army had never been helpful in saving civilians. At the end of the day, whoever wanted to survive would have to rely on themselves.

Moreover, visibility in this red fog was less than three meters, so the utility of firearms and tanks would be minimized—since targets could barely be identified by the human eye, sitting in a tank would make the vision even less clear. The red fog basically masked any scoping abilities of weapons.

As for aircrafts? Was it even possible to take off in an aircraft in the fog?

That wasn't even the worst part of this disaster; the most distressing thing was the unpredictability. No one would be able to anticipate how the world was going to change and who the enemy was.

Zombies? Zerg?

None of these creatures had existed on Earth prior to this fog, and Earth was still the same as before. However, all living creatures were undergoing rapid evolution and it seemed like they were trying to challenge humans—the predators who had been at the top of the food chain for more than 50000 years.

What the human race needed to do was defend their dominance.

However, what Chang thought he needed to do was to survive.

“We might as well just go and occupy a convenience store.” Just as Chang frowned and pondered his next step, Tao suddenly whispered, “There should be enough food reserves, and it’s easier for us to guard a small shop. It’s too rowdy in school now, and sooner or later something will go wrong.”

“Mom, what do you think of this idea?” After listening to Tao, Pangzi turned and asked his mother.

“I still feel like going home,” His mother said in disagreement.

“We agreed to go to the convenience store.” Glasses’ father asserted before his son tried to say something, “It’ll be chaotic if there are too many people, but we won’t be capable to defend ourselves either if there aren’t enough of us.”

“We agree,” Glasses and his mother nodded.

“We also want to go with you!” seeing that most people agreed to this decision, Pangzi’s mother hastily shouted.

“Chang, how about you?” Pangzi and the others turned to Chang.

“I will wait for my parents.” Chang said calmly with his eyes closed.

# Chapter 7: Wild Grass

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“Wait for your parents?” Tao was puzzled.

“Yeah, my parents weren’t home when I went back, so I left them several notes in the house telling them to look for me at school. If I leave now, I’m afraid they’ll never find me.”

“How long are you going to wait?” Glasses continued on questioning.

“At least until sunset.” Chang replied.

“Then we’ll wait here with you,” Pangzi said. “We aren’t in a hurry anyways.”

Pangzi’s mother pulled him aside immediately after Pangzi said so. Chang knew that Pangzi’s mother would complain. She was that kind of woman who would haggle over everything, but was usually not assertive—she usually agreed with the majority. However, she wholeheartedly cared about her son, otherwise she wouldn’t have shown up in school right after the red fog emerged.

She didn’t want to her son and herself to be left behind with the majority of people, so she drew him aside and tried to rush Pangzi to leave with her.

Chang glanced at them, then turned his head away.

“I don’t mind if you guys to go first; I’m just going to wait for my parents here, so if they come, we’ll go and look for you.” Chang seemed to be carefree, but everyone knew that without radio communications in this world, separation meant that they might never meet again.

After listening to Chang, Pangzi and Glasess both showed unwillingness on their faces. Then, they got pulled over by their parents. One of their parents cracked a brief smile, “We shall go first then, good luck.”

Without delay, they then left with their children. Their figures quickly became blurred in the fog as they walked away. However, Tao didn’t leave with them.

“I’ll stay with you.” Tao sat on a desk around Chang, “I don’t get to see my parents anyways, so there’s no room in that little group for me to fit in. I’d rather stay with you.”

“Huh?” Chang was surprised that Tao decided to stay with him.

Tao was the most unsociable one in the dorm; he spent eighty percent of his time studying, so he rarely communicated with others. In addition, he liked to show off his mastery of different subjects, so no one really liked to talk to him. Therefore, Chang didn’t expect Tao to choose to stay with him.

“Tao, are you coming with us?” Pangzi’s voice came from the fog.

“I’m staying with Chang; if his parents don’t show up before sunset, we’ll leave together.” Tao waved to the four dim shadows. The shadowy figures soon disappeared completely after someone responded to Tao.

“Actually, you don’t need to stay with me, I don’t mind waiting alone.”

“I know you’re just saying that because we don’t know each other that well.”

“Even we knew each other well, it still wouldn’t be worthwhile to stay.”

“I just don’t want to stay with those two families,” said Tao as he reached to Chang with his hands open. “You got any cigarettes?”

“No, I told you I don’t smoke.” Chang shrugged, “Do you even know how to smoke?”

“I just want to try; the atmosphere here is too depressing. I’ve never smoked before because I didn’t want to spend money on cigarettes, but now the world is f\*\*ked up, so who cares about money?”

“That’s true.” Chang smiled and took out several candies from his backpack, “I don’t have cigarette, but do you want any candy?”

“Haha, candies are high-calorie foods and one of the scarcest

resources during an apocalypse. Are you sure you want to waste it on me?” Tao unwrapped the candy paper and popped it into his mouth, then slurred, “Do you want to know why I don’t want to go with those two families?”

“Why?” Chang was also curious.

“I lied. I’m an orphan, and they are two families, so there’s no way I can fit in...”

“Orphan?” After listening to Tao, Chang’s heart shrunk and he unconsciously reached into his pocket and touched his father’s finger. Chang had only pinched them gently, but the tissue of these fingers had lost its elasticity, causing the shape of the finger to become deformed.

“Orphan...” Tao looked at blood-red sky feebly, and then their conversation ended in complete silence.

They waited for a while until they were bored. Chang went out of the classroom to look for his parents, then came back soon after and continued waiting. Time flew by, and after going back and forth a few times, the surroundings slowly darkened bit by bit. However, Chang’s parents still hadn’t come.

“We can’t wait any longer, the world is changing too quickly.” Tao and Chang stood at the school gate, gazing at the wild grass that was shrouding the world.

“The height of the grass has reached our waist; if we keep waiting, we probably won’t be able to see the path by tomorrow.” Tao frowned, “It’s become more and more dangerous now. This place reminds me of the Amazon Rainforest. You know the law of the jungle; the night is ten times more dangerous than the daytime.”

“I know... we can’t wait any more.” Chang toughly nodded. Though he desperately hoped that his parents could come, his mind told him that he had to leave and there was no point of risking his own life on waiting.

At this point, most of the crowd had departed. They had probably found some safe shelters, since no one would want to spend a night in school.

“Come on, bro.” Tao patted Chang’s shoulder after he saw his sorrowful face.

“Let’s go.” Chang nodded, then he took the first step out of the school before Tao did.

They both had strange feelings when they wandered on the street. Within less than a day, the humanistic atmosphere of the city had almost completely vanished. Wild grass was everywhere, and all sorts of plants had poked through the pavement and continued to grow vigorously. For the first time ever, the hard cement pavement gave into the vitality of these plants. The pavement was shattered and occupied by clusters of different plants.

The street was even quieter. The onlookers on the street were gone; no one was foolish enough to wander around in this miserable red fog. After the initial panic, it seemed like they all had plans for themselves. Some stayed indoors, some sought help, while only a few wandered around idly.

Chang's and Tao's goal was to look for a convenience store.

Like many other cities, there were plenty of convenience stores and small supermarkets on both sides of the street in Kaifeng. Every few hundred meters, there would be one. Because it had only been hours since the sudden spread of the fog, the majority of people were still alive. Being a store owner was a unique advantage towards survival, hence most of the store owners had locked up their store before anyone else wanted to occupy them.

Unsurprisingly, Chang and Tao weren't able to get into any convenience store they found. But when they walked past a supermarket, they heard a brawl inside.

"Someone inside is fighting." The red fog had lingered for a few hours and its permeability was strong. Whether it be indoors or outdoors, visibility was limited within three meters. The two stood in front of the supermarket, watching the world in the red fog and listening to the curses and fighting in the supermarket. Each of them had different thoughts.

"There's quite a lot of food in this supermarket." Tao knew this supermarket chain; it was pretty big and had a lot of variety of



foods, sufficient for hundreds of people for a long period of time.

“However, it’s too risky to enter. There must be at least a hundred people fighting for food in there.” Chang frowned.

“Yeah, it seems so.” Tao also frowned, “Let’s go, we can’t outcompete them, and it’ll be dangerous even sneaking in there.”

“Yea, let’s find another one.”

Once again, their figures faded into the red fog. They were shooed out of some stores and finally found one that wasn’t locked. The two were delighted and were about to enter the store, but a person came out before they took the first step.

“Who are you?” A person blocked the entrance, yelling and clenching an iron bar.

## Chapter 8: Bacteria

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It was a familiar voice; it probably came from someone Chang knew.

“Hey, we aren’t dangerous.” Chang entered the attack range of this person as he finally got to see the face of that person.

“Sir, it’s really you!” The person in front of Chang was indeed familiar. More precisely speaking, he’d met him this morning—it was the biology teacher, Qingshui Li.

“You are ..... Liu Chang?” Seeing Chang’s face, Mr. Li lowered his guard and put the bar aside.

“Me too, I’m Tao.” Tao followed Chang, letting Mr. Li see his face.

“How did you guys get here?” Mr. Li moved away and said, “Come on in.”

The two nodded and entered the dusky store. The store was actually darker than the outside and filled with red fog. The electricity was cut off by the vines, making it hard to see each other’s faces.

But after their eyes adjusted to the darkness, Chang and Tao recognized more familiar faces in the room—they were all students from the school.

There were dozens of students and their parents, about 25 people in total. This small group was probably formed after the apocalypse, and then they found this store. The leader of the group was probably Mr. Li, the biology teacher.

It seemed like it wasn't just them that wanted to find a convenience store as shelter.

Walking to the other side of the room, Chang found Pangzi and Glasses, as well as a bunch of his other classmates.

"Chang? Tao?" Pangzi stood out from the crowd, "How did you guys get here?"

"Stroke of luck," Chang said with a grin on his face. "We were fortune enough to bump into Mr. Li while he on patrol."

"Good to see you guys." Glasses came over from his parents with guilt written all over over his face.

"It's okay, we got lucky that nothing bad happened." While Chang was speaking, he instinctively seized the gun tightly in his pocket.

"What a relief that nothing happened." Glasses nodded, "This place is safe temporarily."

“There’s no safe place on this planet now.” Mr. Li walked over and said. “The mutation rate of all organisms is too rapid; it’s even faster than that of the Cambrian explosion written in textbooks. With many species evolving at this rate, within three days, they will turn into predators...this strange red fog probably has the same property as the free oxygen in the Cambrian explosion. No wonder why biology was such a large aspect in the college entrance examination. Did they already know from the beginning.....?”

Mr. Li became quieter as he spoke, and the last sentence could only be heard by Chang, who happened to stand beside him.

“What do we do?” Pangzi’s mother shouted. The teacher’s words caused panic.

“I don’t know what to do either. Let’s wait and see and try our best to survive.” Mr. Li sighed, then he sat beside the shelf.

Chang and Tao also sat on the floor after they talked to Pangzi and Glasses.

Time flew by and soon night came without surprise.

The world was in real darkness.

Even when the sun was shining, the red fog was dense enough to block more than 70% of the light. Not to mention, the soft moonlight and starlight were completely absorbed by the fog. In a store without electricity, their occupants learned what pure

darkness was like.

Mr. Li had prepared for the darkness in advance, so he took out a lighter and carefully lit the two candles he had placed on the table before it became completely dark.

“We need to conserve these candles. If the light is too strong, we will become easy targets for other organisms.” The candlelight drove away some darkness and brought relief to this quiet room.

Under the candle light, Chang felt dizzy when he stared at the light source through the red fog. He noticed an unbearable itchy feeling slowly coming from his ankle.

He found an empty corner and then removed his shoes. Through the faint light, he loosened the bandage that was wrapped around his ankle, and a wave of flesh-life odor immediately filled the air.

“Oh god...” Chang almost got knocked out by the smell, but he forced himself to adapt to it. What he saw next was even worse than the smell.

The wound was festering and oozing; it was a frightful mess.

“Wound infection!” Mr. Li’s voice came from behind Chang. He stepped forward and held onto Chang, then he lightly pressed the skin around his wound.

“Does it hurt?”

“It’s itchy, but not really painful”.

“Your wound is infected.” Mr. Li was attentively watching the festering wound. “Do you have any medicine?”

“There.” Chang pulled his bag over and took out some over-the-counter medications.

“Do you have any antibiotics?” Mr. Li looked through the different medicine Chang had in his bag.

“No.”

“Then take some anti-inflammatory pills.” Mr. Li once again looked at the horrible wound, then frowned, “your injury looks a bit scarier than usual. It’s completely different from a normal festering wound!! It seems like it wasn’t only animals and plants that evolved, but rather bacteria too.”

Chang took out the anti-inflammatory pills. The instruction on the bag told him to have one pill at a time, so he poured another on his palm and took twice the recommended dosage.

“Take some more, it might not be very effective.” There was still discontent on Mr. Li’s face.

“Okay.” Chang poured another two pills and swallowed them

with bottled water from the convenience store.

“Does anyone have rubbing alcohol?” Mr. Li shouted to the people in the dim room.

His cry garnered no response.

“I don’t think it’s that serious; it’s merely a wound infection, like the ones I would get when I injured myself as a kid.”

“You also ran into rats and dogs when you were a kid; you clearly know they’re different now. You need to understand that the simpler an organisms is, the easier it is for them to have significant mutations. Bacterial mutations are already pretty common even without the surrounding of red fog.”

“Is it that serious?” Chang’s heart sank upon hearing the bad news. If the tamest of animals could turn into the most bloodthirsty beings, then these pathogens could be much worse.

“I don’t know, we’ll see.” Qingshui sighed and fell silent. The room became quiet again.

Chang put his foot on a stool and left it unwrapped. Probably because the smell from the wound was overwhelming, no one came around. Even Qingshui went somewhere else, so Chang tried to move a little further to the corner to make the smell less noticeable.

It felt as if time had come to a halt in this eerie silence.

Chang was sitting in the corner by himself, and his head got dizzier and he began to feel colder and colder.

He felt a fever coming.



# Chapter 9: First Night

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It was common knowledge that wound infections often led to fevers. In fact, most organisms died of diseases regardless of whether they were human or animal. Even carnivores who lived in the jungle—unless they were starving—seldom picked aggressive animals as their prey, even if they were much weaker than them. This was because they feared being injured. An injury meant a high chance of a wound becoming infected, and the infection could take their life. Hence, having a wound was basically equivalent to death, since they didn't have antibiotics to fight off bacteria and microbes.

This was what Chang was facing.

Although he took anti-inflammatory pills, it seemed to be ineffective in controlling the mutated bacteria. He felt himself getting colder, and his headache became worse; everything in the room became blurry.

Another hour passed, and the people in the room started to look for food for themselves. Chang gritted his teeth and scrambled up to a shelf to take some canned beef, forcing himself to eat it.

Chang knew that no one in this world would or was willing to take care of him. If he wanted to survive, he had to eat something, even if he had no appetite at all.

Chang curled himself up against the wall after he finished the canned food, but he still felt coldness surrounding him.

“Bro, are you okay?” seeing Chang crouched in a corner, Pangzi and the others hunched over.

“Ah! Your foot stinks!” Tao also came over with his nose covered.

“Hey, you know people rarely die from diseases in the apocalypse, right?” Glasses said jokingly, hoping that his joke would ease the tension.

“Come on...most people die of diseases regardless of what circumstance is.” Chang leaned against the wall and sighed.

“You have a fever?” They finally noticed Chang’s pale complexion when they sat right beside him.

“Don’t worry.”

“Have some Advil.” Pangzi took out the pills from his backpack and handed them to Chang.

Gurgle.

Chang took the bitter pills along with some bottled water, then he frailly nodded to show his appreciation to his friends.

Just as Chang was about to rest, a sudden shriek came from the direction of the washroom. The person’s scream sounded like she

was in anguish, as if her vocal cords was torn and she was choking on viscous blood.

“Mom!” Pangzi’s face immediately turned pale as he heard the cry. His rotund body bounced up from the ground as agile as an elk and he rushed to the washroom.

Some other people followed Pangzi out of curiosity.

Chang managed to stand up with some effort, and following the others, he staggered towards the washroom.

Someone had lit a candle in the corridor already.

Under the candlelight, Chang smelled a strong odor of blood as soon as he stepped into the washroom corridor. Some people in the front started to throw up against the wall; the smell of gastric juices and digested food filled the air in the corridor immediately.

Through the gaps between the onlookers, Chang saw something extremely unpleasant that made him nauseous.

A broken body.

The torso and limbs were severely damaged while the head remained intact. She died lying on her stomach, and an adult fist-sized hole on her lower back indicated a brutal penetration. Her organs flowed out from the hole and coated the floor of the washroom. Despite this opening, there was another smaller one on

the chest, but not as wide as the previous one.

Perhaps it was because Pangzi's mother was too obese, but it was even more disgusting since there was a large amount of fat mixed with the flesh. Anyone who saw this mixture of yellow fat, blood and organs would seriously feel unwell.

Fortunately, Chang was too weak and his senses had dulled, so he somehow managed to suppress the nauseating feeling.

Chang turned his head away to avoid seeing the bloody scene, and then his gaze drifted onto Pangzi's face—distraught and hideously angry.

He knew that any comforting words at this moment would be useless.

Therefore, he took a few steps back and leaned back against the wall.

“Whew!” Chang sighed heavily and slowly slid onto the ground.

However, at this time, no one cared enough to pay attention to him. Their attention was attracted to the bloodier scene; except for Pangzi, everyone was in serious fear and trepidation.

“WHAT attacked her?” Someone in the crowd whispered.

However, there was no response to that person's question. The only person who might've seen the attacker was Pangzi, but obviously he wasn't going to talk to anyone about it right now.

Even so, people still paid attention to that question. When someone in the crowd asked, people in the room began to pay attention to everything around them.

However, the surrounding was too dark, and under the flickers of the candle flame they could only hazily observe their surroundings. If the corridor wasn't dim enough, there'd probably be even more people vomiting right now.

They carefully moved back to the store; no one wanted to die tragically in the corridor. Some smarter individuals had already pulled their families away and quietly left the place. They were afraid that the smell of blood would attract more strange organisms.

For a while, the situation was growing increasingly tenser.

It seemed like no one would ever notice Chang huddled in the corner.

Chang felt his body temperature continuously rising and he was gradually losing consciousness. He went into a semi-comatose state.

The situation continued until someone found him at midnight—

he was once again discovered by the biology teacher, Qingshui Li.

He saw Chang crouched against the wall, then he touched Chang's forehead.

"It must be more than 40 degrees Celsius!" Qingshui lightly exclaimed.

He put a thermometer that he found somewhere into Chang's mouth.

Five minutes later, Qingshui removed the thermometer, placed it in front of the candlelight and carefully read the temperature. The highest temperature that the thermometer could detect was 42 degrees Celsius, which was exactly Chang's reading.

"How hasn't he died already?" To be honest, there were almost no thermometers that read temperatures above 42 degrees Celsius. This was because humans could easily die from heart failure if their body temperature ever reached 42 degrees Celsius.

And obviously, Chang's body temperature might've exceeded this number already.

"How is he?" Chang vaguely heard another voice approach; it was probably Tao.

"I don't know, he should be dead, but he's still alive for now." He once again heard Qingshui's voice.

“Is there any chance that we can save him?”

“If his fever continues, he’ll be dead for sure. The infection caused the severe fever, so if we can’t subdue the festering wound, even if he’s in a relatively stable stage, he will still die from this fever.”

“What can we do?”

“If we can find antibiotics, then there’s hope!”

# Chapter 10: Medication

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“Antibiotics are prescription drugs! It’s impossible to find it in convenience stores or someone’s house,” Glasses exclaimed.

“Then go to a pharmacy or a hospital. Otherwise, he’ll die before sunrise!” Qingshui touched Chang’s forehead again, “it’s a miracle for him to still be alive now.”

“Who would go out in this darkness...” Glasses’ voice went quieter as he said apprehensively.

“I’ll go...” Chang heard their conversation and slowly opened his eyes. “I’ll be dead if I stay here anyways; at least there’s hope if I go look for antibiotics. There were quite a few pharmacies and small family hospitals on the street, and I remember there’s one on the corner of the street. Don’t worry, I’ll come back safely.”

As he spoke, Chang scrambled against the wall and stood up. His lips were chapped, “Do you guys have a flashlight?”

“I’ve got one here.” Glasses took out a flashlight from his backpack. “The battery is full, and it should last for a few hours.”

“Thanks.” While Chang was speaking, he handed his backpack to Glasses, “There’s some food and medicine in my backpack, if...If I never come back, you can have them all.”

Finishing his sentence, Chang grabbed the crowbar in his right



hand, with the flashlight in his left hand and pistol tucked on his waist. He then hobbled to the entrance of the store.

“Wait.” A familiar voice came from behind Chang’s back. “I’m going with you.”

Tao caught up.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were so heroic.” Chang said so without making a stop. He unlocked the door and uncovered himself to the dark world.

Chang merged into the darkness and cautiously crept forward within the range of his flashlight.

Grass, moss and bushes were everywhere, and some were almost as tall as an adult. Moreover, the dense fog made Chang feel like he was digging for treasure in a miserable dungeon only illuminated by fireflies.

There were no stars and no moon; there was only an eerie and smothering silence.

Due to the fog dampening sounds within a certain range, sinking into this darkness felt like being thrown in another universe.

“Are you scared walking by yourself? I asked you to wait for me.” Another “firefly” chased over; it was Tao.

“Haha, why are you treating me so well? If you were a girl, I’d probably have fallen in love with you at this moment.” Chang tried his best to hold back the dizziness, then cracked a joke, “You’re good at studying and your face is pretty...you also helped me all along this journey, what a pity that you weren’t a girl...”

“You ass, unfortunately I’m 100% a dude. If you were a girl, you would have fallen for me. Stop bullshitting, we need to get to the hospital as soon as possible.” Tao said as he shoved Chang lightly.

The vibe between them settled again. Under the light, they kept their pace towards the hospital.

Their destination wasn’t far; it was only one kilometer away, and they were both familiar with the area. If they were going there before the red fog, it would’ve been 10 minutes on foot.

However, things were different now. Not only was the world dark, but standing in the middle of the road, the buildings on each sides couldn’t even be seen. The pavement was shattered and hard to walk on. Rubble, soil and the stems of plants mixed together, making it difficult to judge whether they were on the right track.

Moreover, the two needed to be constantly on guard against any dangers that might come from any direction.

The 20 minute travel wasn’t very tranquil.

Fortunately, they still managed to reach the hospital by relying on their familiarity of the area.

Though the journey was dangerous, they didn't run into danger, making them pretty lucky considering all the misfortune they had.

“Do you want to know why I came here with you?” Walking into the hospital entrance, Tao abruptly asked.

“There had to be a reason other than to help me. Your mind was pretty clear and I still don't think you were being heroic.” Chang pushed the tall grass aside.

“Yeah, it's because I had a wound too, and it's infected.” Tao raise his feet from the grass, revealing an injury on his ankle.

Under the light, Chang saw two small circular wounds. The injured area wasn't wide, but was pretty deep. It had already festered, and although it was less terrifying compared to Chang's, pus and blood were oozing from the inside.

“How did you...?” Liu Chang raised his eyebrows.

“Bitten. I was bitten when you went home, but it wasn't by a snake. It was painful in the beginning, but the discomfort went away so I didn't care much. Until I noticed that I had a fever and heard of your symptoms, I realized that we were in the same boat.”

“Well,” Chang moved forward unsteadily, “you didn't look as

sick as me.”

“Yeah, my body temperature was still lower than 38 degrees Celsius, but it’s been increasing.” Tao said. “I can’t just leave it until I get weaker. I don’t want to wait until morning comes, so it’s better to plan in advance before I become immobile.”

Chang didn’t answer back as he used all his strength to maintain his last piece of consciousness.

He felt everything around him spinning and twisting, and his brain got even dizzier. He squeezed the crowbar so hard that his hand turned pale—the pain from his hand kept his mind conscious.

“Stay with me! We’re almost there.” Seeing Chang’s face, Tao stepped forward and pulled Chang’s arm over his shoulder.”

The two lurched into the building.

“The pharmacy is right there.” Tao pointed ahead.

“Hey, do you think there’ll be monsters waiting for us? In horror movies, hospitals are always dangerous to go into, right?” Chang was still joking weakly as if it could divert some of his attention away.

“That’s hard to say, but even if there are monsters, we still need to go. Otherwise, we’ll die here.”

Dragging Chang, Tao opened the pharmacy door and heard a series of noises immediately.

Tao pointed his flashlight forward. There weren't any monsters there, only human all sprawled out on the floor.

"What...?" Tao exclaimed, but obviously no one responded.

The people on the ground looked very weak.

"In this broken world, you didn't think we'd be the only two that had infections, did you? If bacteria had mutations, then there's no surprise that common diseases would become fatal." Chang said in a faint and dull tone, "Leave them alone, it's more important to get ourselves some antibiotics."

After his last sentence, he found himself an empty corner and sat down.

Tao rushed to the counter and got the antibiotics he needed from the piles of medication. He took his dose first, then he fed another dose to Chang.

"I don't know if I can hang on until tomorrow." Chang spilled some rubbing alcohol on his ankle. He struggled to not fall asleep—he was afraid that he would never open his eyes again.

“You should be able to.” Tao glanced at his friend, then gave him some words of encouragement.

“Thank you.” Chang’s black pupils drifted onto Tao. Chang grinned, but because of his chapped lips, a hint of blood appeared between his lips.

“You’re welcome. I’m not here for you, I just happened to help you.” Tao found a clean spot beside Chang and sat down.

“Why has every other organism mutated aside from us humans? If the red fog is some sort of catalyst, reasonably speaking, at least some of the human population should’ve mutated too!” Chang curled up and looked again at his frightening wound.

“We talked about this in biology class, don’t you remember? The more complex the organism is, the more difficult it is to mutate. Since humans are one of the most sophisticated creatures on earth, it wouldn’t be a surprise that we’re the last in queue.”

“So that’s the reason...” Chang grinned again. He had finally lost the battle against his dizziness, even though he had put all his strength in preventing his eyelids from closing. He feel asleep peacefully.

# Chapter 11: Microbes

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With his eyes closed, Chang had a long dream. He dreamed of hovering in the universe, looking down at the red fog-covered Earth. From this god-like perspective, he gave off the impression of being the creator of Earth.

Standing over the azure sphere, Chang saw the desolate Earth. There seemed to be nothing but microscopic single-celled life dividing at a snail's pace.

If the evolution speed was that slow, even until the destruction of Earth in five billion years, the planet would still without a doubt be desolate.

While Chang was praying, the azure planet suddenly became shrouded by the red fog, turning it into an oxblood globe.

Inside the red fog, the monotonous unicellular organisms rapidly evolved and branched into countless species. In the blink of an eye, the world turned into a green paradise full of life.

“How did that happen?” Chang muttered.

As he asked the question, the red fog quickly dissipated. Time accelerated, the Earth was once again in harmony. He saw the proliferation of these marvelous creatures as they thrived on the greenness.

The planet was full of life, and every life was full of vigor—however, the sudden emergence of another life changed everything, humans.

Human had only appeared on Earth for a few million years, but they radically changed the past billions of years of history on Earth.

Humans had unceasingly altered nature, resulting in the rapid decay of other species.

In a way, humans were similar to the infection on his wound; they inflamed and festered the Earth. Soon, Earth's decay would occur if no one took any action. While the Earth was dying, the red fog—as if it was an antibiotic, timely appeared to curb the growth of the pathogen.

No... rather than being an antibiotic, the red fog acted as catalyst – it gave the decayed species a chance to face the human pathogen.

The red fog was not directed against humans.

At the end of his dream, the red fog dissipated after a long period of time, and the “pathogen” on this planet was eliminated. The green world had recovered and once again became a habitat for those marvelous creatures. The paradise had returned.

It was a long, uncanny and inexplicable dream.



Sometime the next day, Chang woke up from his dream. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head so that he could return to reality. From the light coming through the window, he knew it was daytime.

Chang pulled out his almost dead phone – 9:40 AM.

“It’s morning already.” He stretched out his body – he was no longer dizzy. Chang also checked his ankle wound; a scab had formed on the wound already. His body recovered and became almost as energized as he used to be.

“Hey, Tao, time to wake up!” His voice was filled with joy because he survived. He pushed Tao who was sitting next to him – his stiff body slid to the ground.

Bang.

“Tao?” Seeing Tao’s body hit the ground, he suddenly had a bad feeling.

He moved forward to straighten Tao’s body, but the area that Chang grabbed was stiff and sticky – Tao was dead, and his skin began to soften and decompose.

Tao couldn’t be more dead; his muscle was rotting.

“...” staring at his classmate’s corpse, Chang was speechless.

One thing to keep in mind was that Chang's fever was much more severe than Tao's. But things were unpredictable nowadays, who knew whether someone would pass away in the next moment.

"Well, I didn't know you would die before me." Chang tilted Tao's body into a sitting position, then he found a pack of cigarettes and lighter from another man's corpse. He put the cigarette between Tao's lips and lit it.

"Last time you asked me for cigarette, I didn't have any. This time, I hope I've fulfilled your last wish." Chang once again straightened Tao's sliding body, but when he touched Tao's limb, a large piece of sticky flesh fell off of Tao's arm.

"The microbe mutations have made the decomposition speed of corpses so much faster!" Chang pasted that piece back on Tao's body, of which he tried to maintain intact.

Gazing at him for a while, Chang stood up and realized that most of the people he saw yesterday didn't manage to get up.

Though some may have left, only he and a woman were the only people still alive in this pharmacy. She didn't notice Chang at all as she was sobbing in front of a body that she was holding. Looking at her back, she looked especially sorrowful.

"..." He inaudibly sighed and thought of his father when he saw all the corpses around. He reached into his pocket and took out his father's fingers that he kept. The skin and muscle that used to be

attached on them had melted; all that was left was two bones.

He rinsed off the remaining skin on the fingers with alcohol while rubbing it, then Chang walked out the room without hesitation.

“Wait, where are you going?” Just as he was about to leave, a female voice came from his back – it was the sobbing girl.

“I am going to the orthopedics or operating room to find a needle to string my father’s fingers into a necklace. I;m afraid I may lose them if they stay in my pocket.” Chang confessed.

“Can I go with you... we can take care of each other.” Her voice choked and let go of the middle-aged man’s body.

“Yea, its better to stay together.” Chang nodded.

After all, having a companion was safer than walking alone in the apocalypse. Chang was going to propose the idea of leaving together with her. However, he didn’t interrupt when he saw that the girl was in deep sorrow.

Chang waited until she came closer. She was in her 20s. She was neither pretty nor unattractive; she looked ordinary.

Chang cracked a brief smile to this girl. His chapped lips were already healed. A smile also touched the corner of her lips. But at this moment, their smile was full of bitterness.

“Do you know where the operating room is?”

“Not far ahead.” The girl pointed at the corridor outside of the pharmacy.

“Okay, let’s go then.”

They walked side by side in the corridor, and it was very quiet in the hospital. Chang didn’t know where those doctors had gone, but he didn’t see wounded people come in, either. The hospital seemed to be a lonely island. There was no sound at all – everything in here was particularly bizarre.

Passing through the fog, they came to a room with the large sign “Operating room”. The door squeaked as Chang opened it.

Suddenly, he was pushed out of the room by a massive black shadow, along with a strong buzzing sound. He staggered a few step backward until he saw what pushed him out. He threw up immediately at the door.

It was groups of flies that gathered into dark clouds. They were strong enough to even able to push a living person when they were frightened.

After the flies left, Chang repressed the nauseating feeling and walked into the operating room.

Compared to the silent world outside of this operating room, it was full of rustling sounds.

Click, clack.

It came from the operating table. Chang carefully looked at the curtain in front of the table. He saw something that disgusted him again.

It was a corpse that had been cut opened. It was stuffed with maggots in its belly. The maggots were the cause of the uncomfortable sounds.

This time, Chang's puke immediately coated the entire ground.

## Chapter 12: Strange Tree

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Chang repressed the twitching in his stomach, then he turned his head away from the operating table and reached for the surgical instruments.

He collected some needles and threads for stitching, and then turned to the scalpels.

Scalpels were one of the sharpest knives. The purpose of its existence was to cut. Hence, Chang didn't doubt the sharpness of these tools.

Compared to the scalpel, the kitchen knife in his backpack was dull, not to mention the material it was made of. Chang simply picked up a few of the largest ones, then tightly grabbed them in his hands and left the operating room.

The girl outside of the operating room was still vomiting, so Chang stepped forward and patted her on the back. "There, there, they were just flies. If you want to survive in this world, you need to prepare to face any circumstance. Here, take two of these and man up. We'll fight with these knives if we ever encounter anything."

Chang handed the knives to the girl, then headed back to the pharmacy department.

He walked towards Tao's corpse, which already had a pungent odour.

Tao had “smoked” half of the cigarette.

“Sorry buddy, I have to leave you here.” Chang glanced at Tao, then gave the body a big hug. He put Tao’s body back into his original spot, then pulled on his arm. A finger was sliced off using the scalpel.

Chang then scraped off the flesh from his bone and soaked it in alcohol. He rubbed off any remaining pieces and threaded it together with his father’s finger. He put the necklace on his neck.

“I’m taking your finger with me, thank you for the last journey.” Chang called the girl who was mourning her family member. Then, he loaded a backpack that he found somewhere else with antibiotics and antiseptics.

This was the second time he left the pharmacy, but this time he was going to leave it behind forever.

Following the girl and being once again exposed to the sunlight passing through the red fog, the first thing that caught his attention was that the visibility seemed to have improved.

“Is the fog dissipating?” Chang looked at the girl beside him. He clearly remembered that the visibility was less than 3 meters yesterday morning. But now, he could see bushes that were seven or eight meters away, causing Chang to be astonished.

“No...The fog didn’t change one bit.” The girl squinted and carefully observed the fog, confirmed, “It didn’t dissipate; rather it’s even denser than yesterday.”

“Really?” Chang looked around and found that he was able to see within a range of seven to eight meters, so he asked with uncertainty, “Are you sure?”

“Hundred percent sure, why?” The girl was puzzled too.

Seeing her face, Chang no longer suspected her, and instead created a new perception of this world.

The chance of the fog dissipating was low; he knew that before he even asked the girl. If the fog wasn’t dissipating, but vision had broadened, there was only one conclusion he could make – His vision had improved.

“Does this mean I’m the one that mutated?” Chang muttered to himself, “every other organisms has evolved, so it must be the human’s turn.”

Thinking of this, Chang clenched his fists tightly and spent a moment to feel the changes in his body.

First, he clenched his fists, causing his skin to rub between his knuckles. Chang felt that his power had improved, but not by much.



Secondly, he could now capture the soft sound of the air flowing with his ears, and his nose could smell the fresh grass meters away – his sense of hearing and smell were greatly improved.

“What are you doing?” Noticing that Chang didn’t move with his eyes closed, the girl urged.

“Nothing ...” He quickly changed the topic, “How did you get to the hospital yesterday?”

“I was bitten by a stray dog and came after my wound got infected.”

“How do you feel now, anything unusual?”

“Unusual? Not really, the festering has healed, and except for some minor itching and pain around my wound, nothing’s different.”

“Oh.” Chang nodded, “Let’s go.”

The two walked side by side and entered the grass jungle that was as high as an adult in the hospital courtyard.

“It’s strange.” She seemed to realize something suddenly.

“It is strange. To be honest, there should have been more injured and sick people that came to the hospital for medication, but since

this morning, we haven't seen anyone enter. It's eerie, be careful-"

Just as Chang finished his sentence, he suddenly frowned and felt something coming from behind him. He jumped aside unconsciously and escaped an attack from behind.

Phew!

What attacked him was a cane branch, which looked like willow branches, but thicker. It was glossy and red and covered with barbs; it truly was a ferocious weapon.

Chang heard a short scream while he managed to escape. The girl beside him was pulled up by a branch of wicker by her ankle. She hung upside down and soon disappeared in the fog.

"Fuck!" Witnessing the girl being towed away, the instinct of saving a companion as a social animal crowded his mind and he chased after her without a second thought.

He ran after the cane until he came to the center of the courtyard. Through the thick fog, he saw a terrifying scene.

It was a tree – a huge willow tree.

Willow trees were those kind of trees that grew on sidewalks for landscaping, but now that it was seven or eight meters high, Chang couldn't even see the crown of the tree despite standing under the tree.

This wasn't even the most horrifying scene; on this willow, pieces of shriveled human skin were hanging all over the branches. Seeing this, Chang didn't dare move an inch.

The shriveled skins were hung on the barbs of stout wickers; the faces of skin hanging on the branches were extremely grotesque because it no longer had any fat or muscle. These wrinkled faces could create nightmares for anyone who ever saw them – the willow had completely mutated and evolved, other relatively small flourishing willow stretched their arms towards the huge willow as if they were paying respect to it.

Chang wasn't brave enough to chase forward after he saw this scene – he knew it was impossible to save the girl even if he tried his best.

There was no way he could beat this monster.

The girl was dragged under the tress. Then, a few more stout wickers reached over and curled the girl up with their soft and sharp arms. The barbs on the wickers poked into her body at the same time, sucking up her blood while injecting digestive juices into her body.

The whole process took less than 20 seconds, and another human skin was hung onto its branch.

Her empty eyes were still looking at Chang before she died, as if she was looking for a sense of security in her last moments.

“I’m sorry.” Chang stared at the fresh human skin and silently apologized.

He couldn’t save her, and even if he tried to, he would only end up as another decoration for the willow. In the apocalypse, there were no heroes that could always save others’ lives. The ones who could survive were the heroes.

Therefore, Chang repressed the guilt in his heart as he stood still in the grass. He carefully observed the willow, trying to obtain some information on the way the willow hunted.

How did it hunt for its prey? Smell, vision, vibrations in the ground, or by something else...

# Chapter 13: Life And Morality

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Before Chang was even able to decide what to do next, he stood there as still as he could and held his breath. Chang was afraid that if he made any sort of movement, the wickers would endlessly and fatally attack him.

He adjusted his breath and leaned over in the grass at a snail's pace. When Chang observed the strange tree, he noticed something bizarre. Behind the guard of the glossy red wickers, there was a humanlike face on the trunk – it wasn't exactly a face; it was more like a lump that commonly grew on old trees. But now, he saw a bloodshot eye on the lump that only humans had.

This scared Chang.

“What's going on in the world? It's been less than 24 hours and this tree has already grown eyes. I can't imagine what kind of changes would happen if more time passes.”

The answers to the questions raised during the apocalypse had gone beyond his wildest imagination. Who could've ever thought that the unicellular organisms from before the Cambrian Explosion could completely transformed the Earth into a vivid paradise?

But now, it was a different situation. The world already contained many more complex organisms like human beings. What would be the result if another event similar to the Cambrian Explosion occurred?

A spark of mixed thoughts flared in Chang's mind, but as soon as he came back to reality, fear filled his heart once more.

Chang's body became stiff as he spent a long time observing the tree. He made a hypothesis to his own question – that strange tree may have sensed the vibrations from the ground to determine the location of its prey.

Though there were tiny red vessels in the tree's eye socket, it would take at least a few days for the tree to fully be able to see.

Chang further lowered his breathing as he made this judgment, then he removed one of his shoes slowly.

Foosh! He hurled his shoe to the other side of the courtyard.

The shoe fell on the thick grass with a muffled sound. Four or five stout and barbed wickers immediately flew to the location of the sound.

Bang!

The wickers split the bushy grass and hit the ground heavily, destroying the entire region where it hit. Chang's shoe was pretty durable, but was still torn into pieces in a fraction of a second.

The attempt confirmed Chang's hypothesis, so he quickly threw

another shoe at the same spot, and seized the opportunity while the tree was distracted to flee as fast as he could.

He could escape the attack range of these wickers if he could run about 40 meters.

Chang took a deep breath. The moment his shoe hit the surface of the grass and the wickers attacked, he ran for his life. The medicine bottles in his bag collided with each other as he scurried, and the jingling sound from his backpack was a premonition that hustled Chang to quicken his pace.

The jingling was followed by the bloody wickers' pursuit as they quickly responded because their previous attack was fruitless. They quickly approached Chang; they were fast – at least twice his speed.

Fortunately, he had already run 10 meters before the wickers initiated the second attack.

In the end when the bloodthirsty wickers were about to catch Chang, they could no longer reach any further. The wickers had stretched to their limit.

He had escaped the immediate danger, but Chang still had a lingering fear and kept running until he was out of breath.

After he caught his breath, he turned around. However, there was nothing he could see in the fog. The bizarre scene was left

behind, as if whatever happened to him was just an illusion.

He sighed and decided to leave this place forever, as there was no room for him to worry about others' lives. The danger of this world didn't only come from what was behind him; the mutated willow was merely one of those dangers.

Chang felt like a century had passed, and his soul was completely drained the past 24 hours. He lost everyone – strangers, classmates, friends, and maybe even his family. Chang unconsciously caressed the necklace that he made. He couldn't even tell whether he was grieving or not, but at least the pressure of survival didn't leave him any time to mourn.

A bitter smile came on his face, and Chang slowly walked out of the courtyard of the hospital with bare feet as he saw some people gathered in front of the hospital. Some were talking to their each other while others had passed out. Apparently, they were restless and wanted to get some medication from the hospital.

The small crowd was seven or eight meters away, so they couldn't see Chang, but he could see them clearly. Even the conversations they were having was crisp and clear in his ears.

“Mom, dad is dying, let me try to go in there.” A family of three was within Chang's vision range; a teenage boy carried his father with worry written all over his face.

“Don't, you can't go in.” Beside the boy was a middle-aged woman. She shook her head after she heard her son. “We haven't



seen anyone come out from the hospital since this morning.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re all dead!” The boy almost yelled impatiently, “We’ll lose dad if we don’t even try.”

“If someone has to go, it’ll be me.” The woman gently pushed her son aside, “Look after your dad, I’m going.”

“Don’t go into there, there is no way you can pass the courtyard.” Chang’s sorrowful figure showed up from the fog and walked towards the family.

“Who are you?” The woman and the boy looked at him warily due to his sudden appearance.

“Don’t worry, I don’t have any bad intentions.” Chang waved his hand and hid the scalpel behind his back. “I just fled from the hospital. A scary monster is growing in that courtyard. You’ll die as soon as you step in.”

“But my dad... my dad won’t last for long...” The boy almost burst into tears. “We need... we need antibiotics; his wounds are infected.”

Chang looked at the father’s wound; it was as worse than the one he had. It was a deep scratch from some sort of animal and was severely festering.

“Go somewhere else, it’s too dangerous here,” Chang kindly

suggested again.

“The medications are all gone. Starting from this morning, many groups were all scrambling for medication. We didn’t even get one pill.”

“Scrambling?”

“Yeah, humans are extremely vulnerable now, and even small scratches from grass are fatal. Many people got infected and needed medications, so all the pharmacies on the street were basically robbed. The hospital would’ve been in the same situation had someone come out of it.”

“Really?” Chang didn’t expect this. That monster tree somehow did him a great favor. Without its obstruction, he could’ve been torn apart by these desperate groups, not to mention he managed to bring out a considerable amount of medication.

“.....”

“Never mind, I have some antibiotics here. Go ahead and help your father take these pills. I don’t know whether they’re going to be effective though.” The father reminded Chang of Tao, so he sighed inaudibly and took out a pack of antibiotics and handed it to the boy.

He then left the family without looking back.

He didn't need appreciation, nor was he pretending to be a hero. The value that he always believed taught him to help others in such a scenario. Even so, he wasn't pleased, as he knew that he was reducing his own chance of survival when he shared his medication with others.

In fact, Chang was consuming his own life for integrity – which was apparently meaningless in the apocalypse.

# Chapter 14: To Kill

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Chang sighed as he walked through the crowd. He repressed his feelings and tried to stay detached from his surroundings, trying to avoid looking at people who were about to die and hearing the cries from their families.

However, the more he tried to avoid looking around, the more he was able to perceive everything around him.

The anguished faces entered his eyes and into his mind; Chang felt like he couldn't breathe as he walked through the crowd.

He continued forward and gradually drifted away from the crowd. He felt like a lonely soul.

"Sweet heart, you can have the lollipop if you go inside the hospital and tell us what happened." When Chang moved along the street with glazed eyes, he heard a voice that made him uncomfortable.

"No, I don't want to go." Then came a cry from a little girl.

"Are you going or not?" The voice suddenly became stern.

The strange conversation attracted Chang's attention; he could no longer remain uninvolved. He walked toward the voice and saw three men with flat-top hair style.

Among the three, one had a scar on his face, one was stout and one had a hooked nose.

They all had the same kind of standard prisoner haircut. Their coarse hair was closely cut to their scalps.

This kind of hairstyle was rare on the street; the chance of running into men with this haircut was less than one in a hundred. Now that there were 3 men with the same haircut gathered together, their identities were obvious – prisoners.

Both their appearance and behaviour resembled that of criminals, and although they weren't in uniforms, Chang was almost completely certain that they were.

The three also had injuries on their bodies and faces, probably caused by fighting with others. If Chang was correct, they must've been prisoners who escaped from jail after the growth of the red fog, their injuries were all infected.

In front of them was a six-year-old girl. Obviously, they didn't know each other, but there weren't any parents watching over the girl.

"I don't want to go into the hospital, it's dangerous in there." The little girl shrank her neck after she heard what the people in front of her wanted her to do.

"Bullsh\*t, we're just asking you to walk into the hospital. There's

nothing dangerous there.” The hook nosed man said with a grimace.

“...It, it’s dangerous...” The little girl repeated as she started sobbing.

Seeing this, Chang felt even more uncomfortable than when he witnessed death. The struggle between having integrity and surviving made it difficult for him to breath, but he didn’t want to be kind again – in the chaos, things like this happened all the time. It was none of his business, and he didn’t want to risk himself for that meaningless morality.

Chang turned away to the opposite direction. He decided to ignore the cry.

He heard a resounding smack on a face as he took the first step.

“Fu\*k! You’ll do what I say, no more bullsh\*t!” It was a husky and thick voice.

Then, the girl started to cry louder. Chang gritted his teeth, but didn’t stop.

But then, an outrageous sound stopped him – a flick of a switchblade as well as the sound of skin being cut by the blade. What came after was a heart-wrenching cry.

“F\*ck!” He furiously spat and turned around. The first thing he

noticed was a long trail of blood which had already coated half of her delicate face. She cried desperately but failed to attract even the slightest sympathy from the thug trio.

In the thick fog, the visibility of ordinary humans was three meters. To visualize the distance, three meters was similar to an adult leaping or running two steps; it was a very short distance.

Hence, when Chang sank the scalpel into the hook nosed man's neck, the man didn't even have time to see Chang's face.

The tip of the scalpel poked through the right carotid artery, then Chang pulled the scalpel downward, cutting the veins too. He jumped off of the thug's body and blood gushed from the thug's neck immediately. The hook nosed man covered his neck and scowled, but that expression didn't last for more than a few seconds. His body collapsed soon after he shortly moaned.

However, no one cared about the Hooknose; to be exact, no one looked at him. The remaining two were terrified by the young man who came out from the fog. They were all drawn towards his bloody hand and the scalpel.

Chang stood still and clenched the handle of the scalpel after taking the thug's life, then he stared at the remaining thugs.

"Who are you?" The scar faced man broke the silence after he gazed at Chang for a few seconds.

“A passerby.” Liu Chang answered honestly. The feeling of killing someone for the first time wasn’t wonderful, but it gave him a sense of relief. The pressure of having integrity was released as he brandished the scalpel; his heart surprisingly felt lighter.

Contrary to his feelings, Chang’s body was extremely excited. Excess epinephrine was secreted from killing the thugs, causing his body to tremble uncontrollably.

“A passerby?” The scar faced man saw Chang’s tremble and quickly learned that he was merely an amateur. Thus, he revealed a look of contempt, “Kiddo, you must have watched too much Marvel shows and wanted to be a hero. What a pity; today’s the day you’ll learn your lesson to not be a hero.”

While the scar faced man was talking, he flicked the switchblade from his hand. There was blood on the blade – it was this guy who lacerated the little girl.

Seeing here, Chang slightly squinted his eyes and stepped back without speaking.

“Well well well, now you know what fear tastes like.” Seeing Chang stepped back into the fog, Scarface grinned loudly, “Little bastard, don’t try to be a hero when you aren’t! You were daring to kill a person, but facing me, you’re just scared silly!”

Chang calmly stood in the fog which was beyond the scar faced man’s vision. He took a few deep breaths and stabilized his own body. He indifferently looked at the man who was still clamoring.



Then, he moved slowly and walked around Scarface until he was four or five meters behind him – at this distance, Chang could see every movement the man made without revealing himself.

Afterwards, things became very simple. He took two big steps and thrust the scalpel into the man's spine in his lower back. Chang twisted the scalpel, then withdrew the scalpel at the same moment the man uttered a piercing scream. His body was convulsing.

“No...no...”

The unbearable pain from his spine caused the scar faced man to convulse, and his upper and lower body contractions were already disjointed.

The scream finally sparked fear in the last thug; the two killings were too eerie to him. The stout man made a decision that was both right and wrong under panic.

He grabbed the little girl tightly.

# Chapter 15: Danger Level

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“Young man.” The stout man held his dagger against the girl’s neck, then impatiently yelled, “We have no animosity against you; there’s no reason to get in a fight like this.”

“If you want to save this girl, reveal yourself, and then we can make a deal.”

The stout man yelled into the fog, but he didn’t know where Chang was hiding. He couldn’t see anything but the fog. He wasn’t even able to hear Chang’s footsteps, which made him feel powerless.

“Say something!” There was only a muffled echo from the fog, so the stout man shouted, “I said, say something!”

The stout man nervously looked around, and sweat soaked his shirt.

However, not even a ripple appeared in the fog, nor did a response. All he could hear was the moaning from his accomplice.

This oppressive silence made his stout figure tremble from fear and anxiety.

“Son of a bitch! You think I’m afraid of you, huh? I’ll count to three; if you still decide to hide, then this little girl...” The stout man cried while pressing the dagger tighter to the girl’s neck.

A gunshot from in front of him ended everything; the bullet went through his plump lips as he was thinking about what to say. It entered his head, and his stout body collapsed with just a deep groan.

Four meters away, Chang put down his pistol – although he was an amateur with guns, shooting someone in the head just four meters away wasn't a big challenge for him.

Chang came in front of the little girl from the fog. Blood from the long scar on her face had congealed from the end of her eyebrows to the corner of her lips.

Surprisingly, the little girl stopped crying when she saw Chang approach. In the pool of blood, a pair of shining eyes fixed onto this man that was half a meter taller than her.

“Close your eyes and give me a minute, okay?” As if her shining eyes had stung him, Chang turned his head and walked to the man who was still jerking on the ground.

The scar faced man was still scrawling, but due to his spine being broken, the movement of his upper and lower body was extremely disjointed, as if a maggot was wriggling around.

“You know what? You're more disgusting than a maggot.” Chang lowered his body and sat on the scar-faced man's chest. He looked into his eyes and said so indifferently.

Then, as if the world had lost all sound, Chang slowly inserted his scalpel into the man's chest.

Whiff...

The blade pierced through his lungs, and it sounded like a slight gust of air from poking through a ball. Chang patiently waited until the man's chest completely collapsed before he took a deep breath. The smell of death gushed out from the cut.

Chang stayed in a daze for a while, then pulled out the scalpel and wiped off the dripping blood onto the scar-faced man's shirt. He then returned to the little girl.

"Take these antibiotics; I'll help sanitize the cut on your face." Chang gave her some pills from his backpack, then carefully cleaned the cut with rubbing alcohol.

After he finished that, however, Chang was confused.

Should he take the girl with him? It was a great concern in his mind.

At this moment, he could only take care of himself. Within a day, he had been teetering on the brink of life and death several times, and that was without anyone else dragging him behind.

Bringing her along meant that the situation would only become worse.

“You don’t want to take me with you, do you?” After she took the pills, she softly asked. Her sensitivity allowed her to understand Chang’s thoughts.

“I’m afraid that I can’t take care of you.” Chang confessed, “Where are your parents?”

“I ran out from an orphanage. I don’t have any parents or family.” The corners of her mouth curved into a smile at Chang, but along with the smile, blood oozed from the cut.

“Take me with you please... I won’t drag you behind! I have a special power.”

“A special power?” Chang frowned. If a kid told him such a thing yesterday, he would certainly think that the kid was joking, but everything was different today. After he personally experienced the extraordinary feeling from his slight mutation, he wouldn’t belittle anyone who said things of this sort.

“What kind of special power do you have?” Chang asked.

“Since yesterday, I could sense all kinds of danger, even if they were far away.” The girl described with her hands, using simple words to explain, “For example, for those three men, their level of danger was about this big...”

The girl clenched her fist, showing what she envisioned to be “as big as a fist”.

“As for you, the level of danger you give to me is this big...” The girl drew a circle that was the size of an adult fist.

“Okay...” Chang looked at the girl; he knew she wasn’t lying. He then asked, “What about in the hospital, did you sense anything?”

“Yes, it was huge.” She raised her arm as high as she could and drew a giant circle, “It’s even bigger than this.”

“Okay... come with me then.” Chang decided to bring her along and held her hand.

Knowing that the girl had danger-sensing capabilities, he no longer had his previous concerns.

Originally, he wasn’t going to bring her with him. First, he didn’t have the ability to take care of a kid; second, she would definitely weigh him down. He wasn’t a hero or anything. He was simply an ordinary high school student – he even failed the f\*cking entrance exam. Looking back, he had saved someone’s life twice. But even a hero wouldn’t get involved in a survivor’s afterlife, not to mention bringing someone with him – unless she had special powers.

The ability to recognize and visualize danger was an extremely practical ability for survival. The chance of surviving would be

significantly improved if he knew whether something was stronger or not, as he could avoid them instead of meeting their attacks.

“If you can sense danger, why did you caught by those men?”

“They were average men; I couldn’t really feel anything from them.” The girl answered.

“Oh.” Chang nodded. He now understood that the danger levels she sensed wasn’t really how dangerous a being was, but rather their vitality. She mistook the pressure from those powerful being as being danger. In other words, she couldn’t sense whether a being intended to harm her.

“Okay, how about this... from now on, let’s just say that the danger of those thugs was at level 1. If we run into something that is several times stronger, use numbers to help me understand the level of danger you feel from it compared to those thugs. Understood?”

She nodded.

“Okay, so what is my danger level?”

“Somewhere between 2 and 3.” The girl counted with her fingers.

# Chapter 16: Strategy

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“That isn’t too accurate though...” Chang knew that he could fight more than two or three people given the sensitivity and perception of his body he currently had.

“But that’s exactly how much danger I can sense from you.” The girl carefully calculated again and nodded with determination.

“Really?” Chang thought again and realized that vitality didn’t necessarily represent how good someone or something could fight. It definitely had some impact, but couldn’t fully determine how dangerous one was. For example, his vision and hearing had significantly improved, so his vitality had also increased. However, no one could predict how much these sensory improvements would benefit him in a fight.

“Tell me, what’s the danger level inside the hospital?”

“I’d say about 129...oh, no, it’s 130 now and it’s still increasing.” The little girl quickly peeked to the direction of the hospital, and her eyes revealed a trace of fear.

“Oh, that’s certainly a horrifying monster.” Chang nodded calmly and turned away, “Let’s go.”

The little girl also nodded. Though she didn’t know where Chang was going, she still followed him closely.



“About how far away can you sense danger?” Chang asked the girl as he was walking.

“About 100 meters...beyond that, the feeling becomes very blurry.”

“Is your face is still hurting?”

“Yes...but I can bear with it.”

“You’re a brave girl.” Chang kept pulling the grass aside. As long light from the Sun hit the Earth – even just the smallest amount – the plants could manage to thrive in it.

“How old are you?”

“12.”

“You must be kidding me.” Chang looked at the girl in surprise, “You look like you’re 7 or 8! Don’t lie to me!”

“I’m not lying to you! I’m just short... Although I’m 12, I’m only 4’4” tall...But don’t worry, you don’t need to take care of me that much; my physical strength is much better than an average kid. I promise I won’t weigh you down!” She anxiously said.

“Ah... Don’t worry, just stay with me. I won’t abandon you any reason.” Chang turned away to avoid her bright eyes, “Let’s go to a

convenience store, someone I know is there.”

The girl didn't say anything after hearing his promise, and followed Chang even closer.

They both stopped talking after the short conversation. With help from the girl, they avoided a level 35 organism far away. After walking two blocks, they finally returned to the front of the convenience store.

Chang knocked the door gently, then someone in the store carefully opened it.

About half of the people who stayed at the store yesterday had left, but luckily there were still people here that he knew.

Pangzi was still silent; his eyes were red. Glasses and his family had left, but the biology teacher Qing Shui Li was still here.

“Chang, you managed to come back!” Qing Shui was surprised how quickly Chang had recovered, especially because of his previous state. Then, he looked behind Chang and asked, “Where's Tao?”

“Here.” Chang sorrowfully ran his fingers over the necklace without explaining anything.

“Oh...” Qing Shui glanced at the necklace and didn't ask more.

“Where are Glasses and the rest of the people?” Chang looked around and shut the door after he made sure he and the little girl weren’t followed by anything.

“They left; they planned to go somewhere else...” Qing Shui waved his hand, “It seems like his father knows someone in the army, so they went to the military base in the city for shelter.”

“The military?” Chang repeated with curiosity.

“Yes... Although tanks and cannons aren’t useful in the dense fog, the military is still a safer place since they are an armed force. At least they don’t need to worry about mutated organisms for now.” Qing Shui calmly analyzed, “Plus, they should have sufficient supplies in the camp. Food and water shouldn’t be any concern for them.”

“That might not be true.” Chang shook his head after listening to Qing Shui. “The visibility for humans is about three meters, so if the army fires into the fog, it could cause a great amount of death to both humans and animals...But if they don’t use firearms, they’ll only be able to barely defend themselves in front of a large mutated animal... I guess you’re right. Either way, the military is still a lot stronger than us.”

“As for food supplies, bacteria has become even fiercer than when I left. If a human body can rot in 2 or 3 hours, there’s no doubt that it would be the same case for food. Unless food has been preserved, it probably won’t last longer than a day. I think that

even if food supplies were sufficient, a big portion of them might've already rotted."

"You have a good point, the bread and fruits here have become moldy. Aside from vacuum packed and preserved foods, we don't have much left." Qing Shui said.

"It seems like a food shortage will happen in only a few days."

"Yes, the military will face the same situation soon, so I don't think they'll still accept civilians into their shelter."

"But at least... let's just go there and see if there's a spot. It's too hard to survive in the fog by ourselves. This time, the military is our last hope." Chang looked at the 'refugees' in the convenience store.

"I agree... even though they most likely won't accept us, at least we'll be able to get some information about the future of this country and the world. We can get an idea of how to survive." While Qing Shui was speaking, he suddenly lowered his voice, "I feel like the government knows more than we do."

"You mean...?" Chang also lowered his voice, making the conversation only audible between the three of them.

"I'm just guessing, and there's no evidence to confirm my suspicions, but I've always had a feeling that the government had foreseen the red fog."

“They foresaw it?”

“Think about it. Starting from the beginning of 2002, the red fog had appeared intermittently. Though it was very thin, the composition of it should be identical to the red fog that we’re seeing now.” Qing Shui gestured with his finger – it was a character of a teacher; he always spoke using body language.

“Think of all those mornings with the thin pink fog. They were kind of the same as the red fog, weren’t they?”

# Chapter 17: Giant Maggot

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Qing Shui's words caused Chang to recall his memories of the intermittent fog in the recent years. It was true that the phenomenon had lasted for a good decade, but it wasn't until the last two years that the strange fog constantly recurred.

However, the red fog was much less dense, and no organisms had mutated. But thinking carefully, the composition of the fog back then should've been the same as the red fog.

"If I'm right, the red fog is just a condensed version of the fog that we've been seeing for years." Chang sniffed the air discerningly while talking. "Even the smell is the same."

"Exactly... I was wondering why the government made biology such an important subject in the college entrance exam; everything is connected now. Apparently it was all related to the red fog."

"So are you saying the government knew about the properties of the red fog?" Chang frowned.

"They probably only discovered some of its properties, but they probably had no idea that the red fog would become so dense and cover such a large area of land," Qing Shui analyzed. "But what I'm sure about is that some of the national research institutes must have known about the fog's properties."

"However, they definitely failed to anticipate that it could block radio signals, as well as all these other changes to the world."

“Yes, the world is changing too fast. After only a day in the red fog, all the plants and animals have become such fierce creatures. I wouldn’t be surprised if a stray dog came to rob me with a revolver few days later.” Qing Shui cracked a small joke.

“What do we do now?” Chang held the girl’s hand tighter, then beckoned her to stand closer to him.

“We should go to the military.”

“Okay, I am going with you,” Chang looked at the girl, “But we’ll be taking her as well.”

“Is she your relative?” Qing Shui glanced at the girl.

“Kinda.” Chang nodded.

“Hi, what’s your name?” Qing Shui hunkered down.

“Jing, my last name is Ji.” She answered. “What about your family, sir?”

“I’m not from here; my family lives on the other side of the country. I hope they’re fine.” Qing Shui sighed heavily. “Especially my parents...I don’t know whether they managed to survive or not.”

“No one can guarantee their lives right now. Don’t think too much about it.” While Chang was speaking, he subconsciously touched his bone necklace.

“When are we going?”

“As soon as possible. We can’t wait because the environment will become unpredictable once it gets dark.” The two talked in a whisper.

“When we go, I suggest not to take too many people with us.” Chang patted the girl beside her. “She can sense dangerous creatures, but only within a certain range. If the group is too big, we’d become easy targets.”

“Her ability...” Qing Shui looked at the girl with amazement. “So human are mutating too? Why didn’t I feel anything?”

“Hmmm, although the growth of plants has significantly improved, it was only the result of evolution. Mutated individuals are still a minority; if every individual were to mutate, there’d be much more species that were born in the Cambrian explosion.” It was a rare occurrence for Chang to discuss biology in front of his biology teacher.

“You’re right... though I didn’t feel any changes inside of me, if this girl really has a special power, it would greatly increase our chance of surviving.” Then, Qing Shui lowered his voice and asked, “How many people do you think we’ll go with?”



“Five or six, I’ll go ask Pangzi. You can bring one or two.”

“Got it,” Qing Shui nodded.

He was a young teacher and had just graduated from college, so the way he spoke and handled things was energetic.

Qing Shui pulled another young girl over as he responded. Chang knew that girl as well; her name was Lin, a classmate of his. She had high ponytails and pale skin, and her grades were as good as Tao’s. She was here all by herself and wasn’t the type of person that spoke a lot.

“She’s a very distant relative of mine, and even though I rarely get in touch with her family, we might as well just bring her along since she’s here all by herself. Can we?”

“Fine.” Even though Chang wanted to bring someone who could hold their own, he didn’t mention it in front of everybody. Plus, she was the only one in the store without any company or family. If he were to choose someone else, their family would come along for sure. Surprisingly, she was the only choice they had.

“Wait a second, I’ll go ask Pangzi.” Chang looked into the girl’s eyes steadily and nodded, then he went to the corner where Pangzi was sitting at.

Chang saw where Pangzi was as he entered the convenience store since he had improved vision. However, Pangzi was huddled up

motionlessly in the corner and Chang didn't have time to talk to him yet.

When Chang got closer to Pangzi, he noticed that though Pangzi was calmer than yesterday, there was still anger and tenaciousness written over his face. His red eyes seemed sorrowful, but he had lost the craziness in his expression.

Chang gently patted on Pangzi's shoulder and waited for him to speak first.

"You came back?" Pangzi looked up at Chang as he felt a warm hand on his shoulder. Then, he stood up and said, "where's Tao?"

"Here," Chang pointed at one of his pendant, indicated Tao's position. "Don't worry, if you die before me, you'll be hung on here too." Chang made a joke that wasn't funny at all.

"I won't; how could I die?" Pangzi laughed desolately and returned Chang another bad joke, "I still need to carry on my family line. I'd feel deeply sorry to my parents if I wasn't able to."

"If we're going to survive, it shouldn't be hard for us to find someone to give birth to our kids." Chang followed along with Pangzi's joke, then his face became very serious, "Do you know what exactly attacked your mother?"

This question was the one that bothered Chang the most, though he didn't have the heart to ask when he previously saw Pangzi

grieving.

“It was something that lived in the sewage and it sprang up from the toilet. I think it attacked my mom when she walked into one of the rooms. I only saw a vague shadow when I got there; it actually got frightened by me and shrank back its upper body into the sewage from the toilet.” Pangzi’s voice was shaking when he was talking. It seemed like his emotions were about to go out of control, “That thing looked pretty much like a maggot, but was larger and longer. Somehow it reminded me of earthworms, except much more flexible and leathery. Its skin was thick and it was about 2 or 3 meters long, and there were sharp teeth on its mouth...”

“That’s disgusting!” Chang felt slightly nauseous as Pangzi finished his description, “It seems like those who live in the sewage also evolved and mutated.”

## Chapter 18: Surrounded By Danger

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“The world is changing; how could they not change?” Pangzi took a deep breath and re-stabilized his emotions, “So, what’s your plan?”

“Umm... I want to go to the military base with Qing Shui. If possible, we would follow the patrolling troops because it would be much safer.” Chang whispered, “But it can only be the five of us. It’ll be too noticeable if more people go, so are you coming?”

“Yes,” Pangzi nodded. “I don’t have any other options since I don’t know everyone else in the room. I’m going with you guys.”

“Good then, stay low key. Pack some food and weapons. For the food, don’t take anything perishable. I have medication in my backpack.”

“Sure.” Pangzi was a chubby man, so his backpack was also bigger than others. He threw away some daily necessities and stuffed in some canned food. Then, he met up with Chang and Qing Shui.

“Are you guys ready?” Qing Shui picked up a slicing knife, Pangzi held onto an iron bar and Chang held a scalpel. They checked each other’s weapons and backpacks and confirmed that they didn’t miss anything.

Although the two girls didn’t have any weapons, they carried backpacks filled with food and some over-the-counter medications.

They merged into the dark and dense red fog as they walked out of the convenience store.

Just when they stepped onto the street, Jing who was closely following Chang whispered, “There are four level 5 organisms fifty meters away.”

“Level 5?” The others showed a confused look when they heard her. Only Chang spoke softly and anxiously, “I don’t have time to explain. We need to get around this place, and if they’re aware of us, we will only barely be able to fight against the four level 5 organisms with these knives and bars.”

As he said so, he led the group to a narrow valley and hastened towards the military base that was at the edge of the city.

“What does level 5 mean?” Trotting quietly through the valley, Qing Shui asked again curiously.

“It means that the creature’s vitality is 5 times stronger than an average human.” Chang replied.

“Does that mean they’re mutated?” Pangzi asked.

“Maybe.” Chang said, “It’d be wise to not get into fights with these creatures. After all, we’re not playing a reality game where we kill others to level up. Fighting against them isn’t beneficial to our survival in any way. Even if we can beat them, I still don’t

want to get into fights that might injure us, especially when knowing that any injury could be fatal to us now.”

“I see,” Qing Shui nodded. “It’s very likely that for wounds that become infected, even if we’re lucky enough to have antibiotics, the smell of blood would give away our location to other organisms. Though I didn’t expect this kind of ability from her, we’ll have a greater chance of surviving as long as she’s alive...”

As Qing Shui continued talking, Jing interrupted him abruptly.

“A large group of level 0.5 organisms is coming toward us. Should I report this kind of information as well?”

“0.5?” Pangzi frowned, “Are they a group of kids?”

“No, it’s something flying in the sky; they’re extremely fast.”

“Flying in the sky...” Chang tiptoed and looked as far as he could. Seven or eight meters away, a massive black lump of insects rapidly approached them. “F\*ck! Get down! Get down! Hornets!”

Chang shouted as soon as he saw them without shouting too loudly. He then swiftly crouched into the grass. The others reacted immediately and crouched uniformly into the grass as they saw Chang’s actions.

Subsequently, an ear-piercing buzz made everyone’s scalp tingle. A group of hornets as dense as a dark cloud flew over them.

They raised their heads and peeked at the situation; what they saw stunned them completely – level 0.5 meant a hornet the size of an infant, and there was a group of them.

These hornets were equipped with dark and shiny poisonous stingers that were a bit longer than a dagger. If someone were to get stung—more accurately, poked by the stingers—even if the victim was a level 10 creature, it still would have a high risk of death.

“It seems like this danger index only tells a part of the story.” Only after the buzzing of the hornets had completely disappeared to the far end of the fog did they stand up with ashen faces.

“Jing, please remind me if any large group approaches us, even if their individual danger index is 0.1, okay?” Chang still had the jitters.

“Sure,” the little girl nodded seriously, and then asked, “What about 0.01? There is a huge group of them though.”

“0.01?” Chang frowned.

“Yes, there’s an extremely large group of organisms rushing from the west side of the valley. If we don’t move away now, we will get in their way.”

“0.01? What could that be?” Pangzi stood there in place for a

moment.

“Whatever they are, let's just move away first. Our first priority is to be cautious,” Chang ran aside with Jing.

Jing's perception range was 100 meters, so the moment they left, the level 0.1 group passed where they stood.

It was a group of black ants, and each of them was the size of a human palm. Their body armor was shiny and black, and their mandibles were sharp; anyone who saw this group could easily imagine how much damage they could do.

“That's 0.01?” Pangzi's face was covered with cold sweat when he stared at the ants that were three meters away.

“Each of them is about a pound, if you dare try to catch one.” Jing stubbornly said so.

“Hmm... well, regardless of what their danger level is, as long as they're in a large group, just tell me about it.” Chang rubbed his head and sighed, “The world is too dangerous.”

“I will,” Jing nodded gently.

“We should move quickly; don't you remember that ants are omnivores? We could've been their prey if they were starving.” Qing Shui pulled Lin over, “We were lucky that they weren't aggressive towards us, otherwise we would've been chewed up.



Let's go.”

“Yeah.” Chang also noticed that their antennae pointed towards them; apparently, the ants knew of their existence. However, these ants seemed to have something more important to do than hunting, so they only stayed alert as they passed by Chang's group.

“Well, let's just not mess with them. I don't want to be gnawed and become a skeleton.” Chang held Jing's hand again and with Pangzi, they followed Qing Shui.

They resumed their journey, with danger constantly looming over them.

# Chapter 19: To Stay Or Go

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With Jing's Help, they managed to avoid countless dangerous creatures, as well as some gangs, until they finally reached the south end of Kaifeng.

A regiment was stationed here, which meant that there were about 1500 soldiers in this military base – Since Kaifeng was close to the capital of the province, the size of the military base was relatively large.

Unlike other places in Kaifeng, it was crowded with people in front of the wired fence – It seemed like no matter what the circumstance was, only fools made up the minorities. If Chang could think of obtaining shelter in the military base, tons of others obviously had the same idea. The world was facing food shortages and it was impossible to drive – the grass was a meter tall, vision was limited within three meters, and the ground was filled with potholes. These were all conditions that limited mobility. The military base was still a reassuring location despite being surrounded by all kinds of monsters and suffering from food shortages.

A large amount of people gathered here, but since vision was restricted, none of them could estimate the size of crowd. But judging from the smell in the air, there were at least 50,000 people – about one-tenth of the population of Kaifeng.

“Attention please! May I have your attention.” While Chang was pondering what to do next as they stood in the crowd, he saw a man standing in a Jeep shouting through a megaphone.

“All of the residents who managed to come here are welcomed, but please listen to the instructions and don’t push against each other to avoid injuries.” The chassis of the military Jeep was far from the ground and the vehicle top was convertible, hence the driver could slowly drive forward with this man standing in the vehicle.

When the Jeep passed by Chang and his company, they quietly listened to what this man was going to say.

“Silence, silence!” the man yelled through the megaphone, intending to make more people hear his voice. “As you’ve seen what’s been going on in this world, you might have a basic understanding of the situation. So don’t push around as you wish; you know the consequence of getting injured. I don’t want to talk nonsense either, so there are two things I need to tell you.”

“First, you can choose to either stay here or leave Kaifeng.” The soldier who was talking through the megaphone seemed skillful and experienced. He was obviously a carefully chosen spokesman of the military. Also, the crowd didn’t want to miss any useful information either, so when he spoke, everyone stopped discussing and complaining.

“Our plan consists of two parts; first, half of our soldiers will remain stationed here to construct temporary fortifications. We’ll do as much as we can to create a relatively safe living environment.”

“Second, the rest of our soldiers will leave for Zhengzhou, the capital of the Province. They will be meeting another regiment there. Furthermore, they might move to Beijing to seek help from the central military. Hence, you have two options; for those of you who want to stay, please go south to enter our base, and for those of you who want to leave with our soldiers, stay where you are as we are leaving soon.”

The spokesman took a breath after making the long announcement, “The second problem we are facing is food shortages. We all know that the food supplies are insufficient. The same applies to the military, so we hope you have prepared your own supplies, as our food distribution is very limited!”

As he finished the sentence, the quite crowd suddenly became lively, and even became enraged.

“Why don’t you give us food?! I heard that the grain reserve in our country is sufficient to last for three years even if the farmers stop farming,” a person in the crowd shout loudly.

“We grew the crops, so why are you in charge of our property? Plus, we paid taxes to support the military too; you should be the last person to have food!”

“Why don’t you give us food; you are crueler than those man-eating monsters out there!”

.....

The crowd clamored vigorously, but no one had the guts to climb on the Jeep – The army was still a deterrent for civilians. They didn't dare fight, so they kept talking to express the unfairness.

The man on the Jeep patiently waited until the heated shouting calmed down, then said, "Listen to me, please."

He repeated the sentence twice, but the crowd had barely calmed down; he quickly announced when he caught a gap between their venting, "With regards to food supplies, I would like to explain why. The crops in our warehouse are no longer edible. If any of you still are suspicious about this, you are welcome to visit the depot. The rice and wheat are infested and moldy, and the place is too stinky to even walk into; those crops are poisonous."

His words were quite convincing, and sure enough, most people in the crowd had calmed down.

"Therefore, the military suffered from the food shortage too. We really don't have many supplies left except for some crackers and instant noodles. We do hope that you can find and bring your own food."

The spokesman left as he made sure the crowd understood what he had said. He patted the driver on the shoulder, and then they drove to the other side to make the same announcement.

Chang and his company started to consider their own future.

“Are you going to Zhengzhou or staying in Kaifeng?” Qing Shui whispered to the group when the crowd became quiet.

“I don’t want to go anywhere else.” Chang said, “Other places must be pretty much the same, so there’s no point in fleeing to another city. I know this city better and I want to go home to see whether my mom is still alive or not some time in the future. What about you; are you staying or leaving?”

“I’d like to follow the army and go to Beijing; I feel like they must have known something was going to happen, but I’m not confident that I’ll be able to survive all the way to Beijing, so I’m staying,” a wry, self-mocking smile appeared on Qing Shui’s face as he spoke.

“I’m staying too; I don’t have confidence in staying alive once I walk out of here.” Pangzi was the person who bragged about how he would run out from school safely even if all his classmates turned into zombies suddenly, but looking at the fog and the vigorous grass, his eyes expressed a clear look of fear. “To be honest, if I wasn’t following you guys, I wouldn’t even have had the courage to come here from the city center; I would’ve died at the beginning. Therefore, I choose to stay here.”

“I’m staying too,” Lin also whispered. She had been following them silently all the way here.

“What about you?” Chang hunkered down to the little girl.

“I’m following you.” Jing smiled, and the cut on her face slightly opened as she smiled.

“Good. Since we all chose to stay, we need to discuss our plans for the future.”

“Our mission is to survive as long as possible.” Qing Shui gave a small smile, “but the difficulties are the food shortages and finding a safe shelter to live in.”

“As for a shelter, the spokesman said that they would open up a place.” Chang added, “Though the military in Kaifeng isn’t equipped with heavy firearms, living here temporarily wouldn’t be dangerous.”

“Then, there’s only one problem.”

“To obtain food!” They responded at the same time.

## Chapter 20: Confrontation

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“In fact, the growth rate of both animals and plants is fast. There should be an abundant food source,” Qing Shui said as he looking at the city. “Without preservatives or other forms of storage like vacuum sealing and fridges, most foods will perish extremely quickly. Therefore, we need to go out every day to look for food.”

“That’s too dangerous!” Chang shook his head, “Even if Jing is helping, it’s still not a guarantee that we’ll be able to avoid danger.”

“But there’s no other way around it... Perhaps vacuum sealing could make food last a little longer, but it wouldn’t stop the growth of mold and bacteria. Speaking of which, we don’t even have the necessary equipment to vacuum seal food,” Qing Shui rubbed his temple.

“Wasn’t there a chemical that stops bacterial growth?” Lin hadn’t spoke at all the entire time, but what she suggested had shocked everyone in the group. “Formalin... the chemical used to preserve corpses. Doesn’t it prevent the growth of microbes? Wouldn’t that solve the issue of spoiling and rotting food?”

“Formaldehyde?” Pangzi exclaimed, “Are you crazy? We’ll get poisoned!”

“It won’t be that bad as long as we dilute it to certain extent,” Qing Shui surprisingly made no objections after he heard what Lin said. “Although it’s bad for your health, we can still try it. At least



it's a good preservative that can help us store food for a few days without rotting.”

“We'll talk about it later.” Chang added, “It's a bit too early to think of a way to preserve food without even having any food in hand. We'll see how the military arranges us first.”

The group sunk into a brief silence as Chang spoke, and then they looked at each other and waited quietly where they stood.

After about three hours, the military finally informed all the residents in front of the base – it required great effort just to make a single announcement to more than 50,000 people in a world without radio transmissions and electricity.

The crowd was separated into two huge groups based on those who had chosen to stay and those who had chosen to go to Zhengzhou. Those who wished to stay were slowly brought into the base.

The base was huge and there were two or three empty hangars. Even though there were a large number of civilians staying here, there was still enough space for all of them to live there. Everyone walked orderly as if they were afraid of being left behind.

Soldiers on both sides of the thick line were fully armed. In the military, there were no signs of mutated animals of any kind, likely because they had already been eliminated immediately; the base looked safe.

After the long wait until sunset, all the civilians were placed into different zones.

For those who staying in the hangars, some moved to tents, some received clothes and some obtained blankets. Chang and his company were arranged in the soldier's barracks in a small room with 4 bunk beds. The layout of the room looked like the student dormitory, but it was cleaner and simpler.

The arrangement wasn't gender specific; people were placed in the base in families and parties like Chang's. Therefore, the five of them stayed together. After all, in this environment no one wanted to be separated from loved ones and friends. In survival situations like this, gender became a negligible issue.

This room could normally fit 8 people, but there were currently 12 people in this room – except for Chang's party, there were a family of three and a family of four.

The family of three seemed exceptionally vulnerable considering the state of the world. They consisted of a young woman and her parents that were nearly seventy years old.

However, the family of four seemed much more assertive; there were two brothers in their twenties who looked fierce, and their parents were about 50 years old, but looked energetic. This appearance of all four were unfriendly; the two brothers were wearing vests without shirts, showing off their heavily-built figure.

They occupied the best four beds in the room and were being completely unreasonable which irritated Chang a lot.

“Yo, buddy! We have 12 people in total and there are only 8 beds. It should be two beds for three people; you’ve already taken advantage of us by taking 3 beds. There’s no room for negotiation, you have to at least give up one bed.” Chang stepped forward as he said, “there are only 8 beds, no one is taking advantage of another!”

“Look at this angry little man!” The 2 brothers turned around from making their bed.

Qing Shui and Pangzi also stood up as they saw the conflict.

The three young men on Chang’s side confronted the three other men from the other side. Both side were aggressive. Chang became less sympathetic as he had previously killed three men. Pangzi was the most thug-like person in the school dorm already, in addition to the fact that his mother was torn apart by a mysterious monster; he wouldn’t be afraid of any of the three men he faced.

As of Qing Shui, though he was usually modest and humble, he wasn’t afraid of anyone right now.

Hence, both sides seemed evenly matched, and it seemed impossible to resolve the issue without a fight – both of them were simply acting in their own interests. More importantly, no one wanted to to injured in the battle.

After a few minutes, the mother of the brothers came over with fake smile on her face, trying to mediate the conflict.

“Well, everyone came for sheltering; it was fated for us to be assigned to the same room. It’s not beneficial for either of us if we fight. How about this...” the woman glanced at the other family as she talked, “We’ll give out a bed, you guys can have four since there are five of you. They can have one for their family. I think it’s fair this way.”

She smiled at the family and asked, “Am I right?”

The family of three didn’t say anything.

“See, they agreed. Let’s just forget about.” As she spoke, she pulled her husband and sons back.

This confrontation ended just like that – both sides flaunted their power to get what they wanted in this negotiation. It wasn’t a conflict or battle, so there was no winner. To be more accurate, both parties were winners, and the weak third party was sacrificed.

The law of jungle applied everywhere, especially in the current situation.

## Chapter 21: Water Bottles

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Seeing that the two brothers were pulled aside by their mother, Chang and Qing Shui returned to their own place, leaving the family of three standing there feebly. They never even had a chance to say anything.

Chang returned to his own bed and organized his sheets, then sat on the lower bunk bed and said, “We weren’t nice doing that...” Chang glanced at the family of three and whispered, “The old couple seems weak; they’ll get sick easily if they sleep on the floor without blankets.”

“We didn’t decide that, and it wasn’t a matter of being fair anyways.” Pangzi sat beside him and said, “We got less beds than we should have. Now isn’t the time to be thinking about others. We should decide who’s going to sleep on which bed.”

“Jing and Lin should have their own beds and us three will take turns to sleep on beds. Is that fine?” Qing Shui looked at Pangzi and Chang following his suggestion.

“It’s fair,” Chang nodded. “Each of us can take turns sleeping on the floor. That person should try to pay attention to the surroundings so that we can watch out for these strangers.”

“I agree.” Pangzi nodded.

Lin agreed silently, but Jing surprisingly opposed the idea.

“We can share the same bed... I’m scared of sleeping by myself.” Jing quickly glanced Chang’s face and asked gingerly, “If you don’t mind?”

“Okay.” Chang nodded. Then, we have enough beds for everyone, but we should still take turns staying up even if we don’t need to sleep on floor.”

“Since everything’s settled, let’s have dinner. We’ve been tossing around the whole day and it’s getting dark out there.” As Qing Shui spoke, he took out some vacuum sealed bread from his backpack and ripped open the plastic package.

A musty smell wafted from the opening after Qing Shui opened the pack.

“Sh\*t, the bread is full of mold too!” Pangzi looked at the bread and complained. “The packaging was such bad quality... If it was sealed better, the bread should’ve been able to last for two or three days in this environment.”

“We’re lucky that it’s still edible.” Chang took the bread and peeled off the top layer of green and hairy mold from the crust. He took a big bite and then frowned. “It really doesn’t taste nice at all though!”

The moldy bread left a strong stale taste in their mouths as if they were eating blankets that had been left in the closet for years without cleaning. The bread had a waxy texture.

“Eat more.” Qing Shui took out all the bread he had from his backpack. “We might not even have moldy bread to eat tomorrow judging by how fast it’s rotting.”

“Yeah.” Chang took another bite; his voice was slightly slurred, “If we try to save the bread for tomorrow, I am afraid we’ll only have green hairy mold and no bread.”

Pangzi sighed heavily, then opened a package and removed the green mold like how Chang did. He smiled wryly and said, “To be honest, despite how bad the bread tastes right now, it might taste delicious in 15 days, if we can even survive that long.”

“Really?” Chang suddenly laughed as he heard Pangzi’s comment. He was surprised as he chewed the bread more carefully, “I think you’re right; it tastes a little like grass!”

Chang torn open another package as he finished speaking and handed the bread to Jing and grinned. “Try it yourself!”

Jing nodded heavily and imitated what Chang did to his bread. She took big bites from it as if it was hot and fresh.

Their dinner ended with a weird atmosphere; it seemed like everyone understood the importance of staying optimistic and imagining a better situation, even it was woven with lies.

“It seems like listening to the censored news wasn’t as useless as

we thought,” Chang and the other four teased each other for a while, then laid down on their own beds.

“At least I can get an understanding of the current situation by listening to the news, even if it might not be the truth.”

Since Chang was sharing a bed with Jing, he chose the lower bunk bed so that it would be more convenient for them.

Lying on the bed, Chang and Jing faced each other. Even though his eyes were closed, he still knew Jing that was trembling as the bed was slightly shaking. He knew exactly what this meant.

“Are you afraid?” Chang looked at the long and deep scar on her face. At this moment, he finally realized how strong she was – she had been suppressing her fear of this terrible world. She was alone and had no relatives or friends. Not only did she face mutated animals, but she was also assaulted by other humans; she was cut on the face, leaving a long and bloody scar.

Chang recalled how the journey had been since she followed along. She didn’t cry in pain or fear, nor did she weight down the team. Her trembling made him aware of how scared she was and how much she carried in her heart.

She was such a brave girl!

“Are you okay?” He patted her on the shoulder.



“It’s okay, I’m better now.” As she spoke, she slowly stopped shaking and closed her eyes.

Seeing this, Chang loosened his guard and was soon overwhelmed by fatigue. Tonight was Pangzi’s turn on guard duty, so Chang slept soundly.

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As the sun first rose up into the sky and shined through the red fog the next morning, Chang sat up. Though his movements were swift and quiet, everyone in the room opened their eyes almost at the same time. This proved how wary and alert everyone was. It was as if they were soldiers who were on alert even while resting.

When Jing sat up, Chang gently touched her forehead to see if she had a fever – luckily, her body temperature was normal.

Chang stood up and noticed the three people who slept on the floor last night – two of them were the father and daughter from the family of three, and the other one was one of the two brothers.

The father and daughter turned their heads as they saw him got off bed, but the brother stared at Chang’s face for a long time without hiding his displeasure.

However, Chang wasn’t provoked by him. Instead, he gave a friendly smile to the brother, and then put on his shoes and went out of the room.

“Where are you going?” Jing shouted behind him.

“To the bathroom!” Chang waved his hands and then walked out of the room.

The soldiers’ dorms didn’t come with private bathrooms in each room. Chang finally found the bathroom after he passed by three rooms – it was a large shared bathroom for the whole floor.

However, Chang hesitated as he stood in front of the bathroom, and then returned to the room.

“Do we still have the plastic water bottles from yesterday?” Chang pushed open the door and asked Pangzi loudly.

“Here.” Pangzi nodded and took out a water bottle that had some water inside and threw it to Chang.

Chang caught the bottle and drank up the water and then walked out of the room again. But this time, someone followed him – it was the brother who had slept on the floor last night.

“Yo bro, why do you need a water bottle when you’re going to the washroom?” The man put his arm around Chang’s neck with great force, and his voice got even louder. “You got a problem or something down there? I bet your piss drips on your feet while you pee.”

## Chapter 22: Disturbed

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“Yeah, I’m afraid that I’ll pee too far and splash it onto you.” Chang shook off the man’s arm and freed himself from the pressure the man put on him. Chang frowned tightly without saying another word.

The man didn’t continue provoking Chang when he saw that he was able to get rid of him easily. The two walked side by side to the shared bathroom.

Dawn had just arrived and not many people had woken up yet, so the bathroom wasn’t crowded at all. As Chang walked into the bathroom, he stood closely to the entrance and released himself into the bottle.

“Damn! You’re stupid. What are you gonna do with it, save water?” The man glanced at Chang and muttered, then walked up to a urinal and loosened his belt.

As he peed into the urinal, he gave a look of relief.

On the other side, Chang finished before the man, so he came up to the closest urinal to empty the bottle – but at that same moment, when he was about to pour the liquid and the man was enjoying his moment, something happened!

A tentacle quickly broke through the cap that covered the bottom of the urinal and attacked the man standing in front of the urinal. Before he was aware of what was happening, the tentacle smashed

his genitals violently and pierced his body from his lower abdomen.

Chang was going to empty the water bottle, but jumped far away from the scene as he saw this. He turned away as fast as he could. His footsteps were mixed in with the man's shrieking.

“AHHHHHHHHH——!”

The loud ear-piercing scream woke the whole floor, but a second before the man screamed, Jing, who was staying in the dorm room, jumped out of the bed and rushed to the door.

“What happened——!” Pangzi shouted behind her. He knew that his voice might've been drowned out by the painful scream, so he shouted exceptionally loud.

“I detected an organism that has danger index of 12 coming from the direction of the bathroom!” Jing explained as she ran. Pangzi and Qing Shui rushed out with her as they heard her words.

The three ran all the way to the front of the bathroom, and then they sighed heavily as relief. Chang was standing beside the entrance and his body was intact.

“What's going on?” Pangzi wanted to peek into the bathroom, but the screaming inside seemed to remind him of some bad memory.

“Don’t.” Chang pulled him back immediately and tried to block his vision. The entrance door was slightly opened. “There’s a monster inside.”

From where Chang pointed with his index finger, they saw the horrifying scene from the slightly opened door panel. Fortunately, they weren’t able to see clearly through the red fog. All they saw was a vague shadow of the monster smashing and dissecting the man, then dragging him down into the sewer.

“F\*ck, F\*ck this sh\*t!” Pangzi was horrified and his face was distorted with rage.

“Is it the same monster?” Obviously, Chang was referring to what had happened to Pangzi’s mother.

“No, the other one was darker and its tentacles was less sharp; I don’t see the resemblance.” Pangzi breathed heavily and panicked as he shook his head. “I am glad that you weren’t...”

“I’m alright, I used the water bottle.” He sighed and threw the bottle that he didn’t have time to throw away into the bathroom. “Bang,” the bottle hit the floor and made a sound.

This sound quickly attracted the attention of the tentacle which was still dragging pieces of flesh. In the blink of a moment, the bottle was shattered into small pieces of plastic by the strong tentacle.

“Thank god the tentacle wasn’t long enough to reach here, otherwise we’ll be dead too.” Qing Shui was standing behind Chang and exclaimed with unnoticeable admiration. “This creature has extraordinary reflexes, but its tentacles are still strong and powerful! I really want to know what its body looks like; I bet there are barely any humans on Earth that can react as fast as it.”

“Yeah, the dead man didn’t even know he was attacked until he felt pain.” Chang recalled the situation. “Unfortunately, he was torn to pieces not long after he realized it.”

Chang stopped talking abruptly because he saw someone walking towards here – they were people that he was familiar with.

It was the family of the dead brother. They had only moved after Qing Shui. They knew the voice of their beloved son, so they also arrived at the scene very quickly.

Ultimately, they couldn’t perceive danger as well as Jing could do. Moreover, with the red fog lowering their vision, they spent sometime figuring out where the scream came from, and hence they were slower than Chang’s group.

Their bodies were seized by sudden shock.

They saw the scene from the door that wasn’t closed tightly. The monster had cut and dragged most of the brother’s flesh away, and all they saw were pieces of clothing soaked in a pool of blood.

However, based on the previous screams and the familiarity of the blood stained clothes, they could easily connect the pieces together and find out what happened to their son.

As they realized that his brother had died, the other brother stepped forward and grabbed Chang's collar tightly and threatened, "What did you do to my brother???"

"A monster with tentacles came out from the sewer and killed him." Chang pushed away the brother as he said so; no one liked to talk being threatened like that.

Chang nudged him, but the brother didn't let go, which made him very upset. Initially, he didn't have a good impression of the family, and now the brother was being irritating and unreasonable. Therefore, he pushed harder to try to get the brother away from him.

However, because of how hard he pushed in addition to the brother holding his collar so tightly, Chang's collar was ripped apart and it revealed his bone necklace.

This made Chang even more angry, so he pointed to the bathroom and yelled, "If you want revenge for your brother, go ahead! It's still in there and shouldn't be far away. You are f\*cking yelling at the wrong person, you son of a b\*tch!"

The man noticed the unusual necklace on Chang's neck, and then glanced at the bathroom. In the end, he didn't have the guts to enter.

While Chang and the brother were in a dispute, on the other side, the man's mother burst into tears.

“Son.....my son!” the woman was sitting on the ground and her cries were loud and heart-breaking; not everyone could endure such grief at her age.

But Chang looked beside her and was extremely disturbed; although she must have honestly been mourning for her son, she continued crying extremely loudly. There was likely a hidden intention in her actions.

As expected, after less than a minute, her disturbing cries and the previous screams attracted the attention of a lot of people who lived on the same floor. They showed different looks when they saw the woman sitting on the ground and crying desperately.

Some asked what happened, some were sympathetic, some were standing in the distance quietly observing and some noticed the blood in the washroom.

“Let's go.” Chang saw the growing crowd of onlookers, and he didn't feel very good right now. He left from the center of the crowd with Jing and gestured Qing Shui and Pangzi to leave, too.



## Chapter 23: Narrow-Minded

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When Chang held Jing's onto hand and was about to leave, someone grabbed his shirt tightly.

"Where are you going?" It was the dead brother's father who gripped Chang's clothes and yelled, "How dare you leave without giving us an explanation?"

"I gave a clear explanation already; it was none of my business." Chang tried to get rid of the hand on his clothes and raised his voice so that the crowd could hear him. "I've made everything very clear. We went to the bathroom together and when he was using the urinal, a monster with tentacles attacked him from the sewer. I hope I've made my point now, so stop making things difficult for me."

"Why weren't you attacked then?" the father questioned.

"I don't know; why don't you ask the monster yourself?" Chang was provoked by this question. "I didn't ask it to attack your son, nor I am its father!"

Chang didn't emphasize "father" deliberately when he spoke, but the word had obviously caused pain to the man who just witnessed the death of his son.

Without a doubt, the dispute heated up pretty quickly.

The family had just lost their own beloved son, but there was no one they could vent their anger on, so all the dissatisfaction and anger from their hearts was pushed to Chang. Also, because Chang felt that there was no room for compromise between him and the family, he no longer held himself back and started arguing, too. All of a sudden, their dispute had gathered a crowd of spectators; it seemed like everyone was getting involved in meaningless conflict.

There was no sign of stopping until someone from the military showed up.

Two soldiers dismissed the crowd as they received orders from the squad leader to bring Chang and the father to an office.

“Okay, tell me what happened.” A captain-like soldier sat behind the desk, looked at them and knocked on the desk.

“He set my son up! He made my son die!” The father complained to the captain and tried to address the injustice of what happened. His face was distorted with hatred and grief.

However, seeing the father’s face irritated Chang even more. Even before the apocalypse, he had hated these kinds of people who distorted the truth to act in their own interests; they were greedy and had no conscience. These people became even more despicable after the apocalypse; within a day, they had ignited Chang’s anger more than three times.

However, Chang was a relatively reasonable person, and although he was very irritated, he still managed to suppress his

emotions. “Captain, it’s very simple. I went to the bathroom with his son, and he was attacked while I wasn’t. This man didn’t have anyone to blame for his son’s death, so he insisted that I caused his son to die as an excuse to calm himself down.”

“You can inspect the bathroom yourself if you would like to know the truth. You’ll reach the same conclusion as mine. His son was killed by the monster, and there’s evidence of it from the blood and flesh at the scene. Obviously, I don’t have power to control a monster; I was lucky that I didn’t get attacked because I didn’t go up to the urinal at the same time as his son did. This is exactly what happened, and if I knew that there was a monster waiting, I wouldn’t have even dared to go into the bathroom.”

“I agree,” the captain nodded after he heard Chang’s explanation, so his questions were no longer focused on the argument between the two. Instead, he asked questions he was truly concerned about, “The monster was able to attack a human from the sewer?”

“Yes,” Chang nodded.

“Send someone to inform the soldiers in other departments. Tell them how the monster attacks; also, notify the civilians to be more careful.” The captain stood up as he gave the command to his subordinates.

He seemed shrewd and smart, and he knew exactly what to do under the current circumstances.

Therefore, he nodded to Chang and the father when he walked

past them. The captain didn't explain anything, nor did he take notice of the father's pleading. He left the room without looking back.

"I'm sorry, in this situation and circumstance..." Chang gave a mocking smile to the father after the captain left. There was a hint of irony in his words, "Such trifling matters don't deserve the captain's attention."

Chang turned away without hesitation as he spoke – since he had offended the father, he didn't mind offending him to the very end.

When Chang returned to his room from the office, Jing and others were waiting for him nervously with worry written all over their faces.

"How did it go?" Pangzi asked first as soon as he saw Chang. "Did the soldiers do anything to you?"

"No. To be honest, the military is already busy enough trying to solve the problems of food shortages and communication with the central military, so they didn't care about such a small issue," Chang shrugged. "Plus, anyone with a discerning eye could easily tell that the death of his son was none of my business."

"Those bastards!" Pangzi sat back to his bed after he learned Chang was safe. "His own son was attacked by a monster, but he deliberately accused you of killing his son. I really don't understand how he can do this."

“There are many of these type of people. Eventually, everyone will encounter one in their life.” Chang sighed.

“Still, you shouldn’t just continue offending them.” Lin, who didn’t speak for a while, argued softly, “We won’t get much peace as long as we continue to live with them.”

“That’s might not necessarily be the case.” Chang added, “In their little and narrow minds, I’ve already completely offended them the moment their son died. How we treat them afterwards doesn’t matter anymore.”

“How do you know?” Lin ignored Chang’s explanation and continued to ask.

“I know these kinds of people all too well.” Qing Shui gave a similar answer, and then brought up another topic. “We should be aware of what they do later, but right now it isn’t a good time to discuss this.”

“Yeah, I thought so,” Pangzi nodded. “Food; the food problem is the most critical issue at this moment.”

“Has all our food perished?” Chang dismissed all the irritations when he heard the word “food.”

“They aren’t edible anymore.” Jing wiped a barely noticeable tear drop on her face, then took out several bags of food and bread from the backpack.

## Chapter 24: Hunting

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“That’s gross!” When Chang took the food from Jing, his face crumbled. The bread was squishy and sticky. He frowned, “Is this bread? It’s literally become a ball of yarn.”

“Unfortunately, not a single piece of it is edible.” Pangzi showed a look of pity when he looked at the bread.

“What can we do now? We haven’t had proper food since two days ago.” The five had been tense and stressed from running back and forth in the military base. This was already very energy consuming, not to mention that they didn’t have any protein the past two days. Their strength was drained.

“The military should be distributing food these days. Although most of their grain reserve probably perished, they’ll figure out a way to solve the food shortage.” Qing Shui leaned against the wall and said in a faded voice, “Let’s just wait for now.”

“Yeah.” The other four nodded as they stood in silence.

They didn’t wait too long; the family of the dead son came back, followed by some soldiers who were distributing food around.

“Each of you gets half a pack of hardtack or half a can of canned food. You can only choose either one of these, and no one can take more than that.” The soldier didn’t explain much and gave out a portion for everyone in the room, then he continued onto the next room with the cart.

“Hardtack is a kind of cracker that soldiers carry in the war zone as food. Apparently, it can last longer than regular crackers in the supermarket.” Qing Shui took a pack of hardtack and flipped over the package. “The sealing technique they used on the hardtack is so much better than those in the supermarket, and it contains less moisture. There’s no doubt that these can be preserved for a long time.”

“The seal on the canned food is also impressive.” Pangzi opened a can and sniffed, “Although it smells a bit sour, it’s definitely edible.”

“But we only have half a piece of hardtack or half a can of food for each person. There’s no way it’s enough.” Lin was sitting by the bed as she spoke emotionlessly.

“We’re lucky that we still have these.” Chang took a bite of his cracker and sipped some water, causing the cracker to expand in size.

It took less than a minute to finish the cracker and canned food. The five had been hungry for two days, so they swiftly finished their meal.

Each of them laid on their beds after they ate up their prestigious and only meal of the day.

“I feel even hungrier after eating that cracker; do you guys feel that way too?” Pangzi rubbed his belly as it rumbled deeply.

“It might be because the food we just ate stimulated our stomachs to become more active.” Chang felt the same as Pangzi. He laid down for a while, then sat up while rubbing his right eye, “Although we’re still hungry, at least we’ve had something to eat and regained some strength. Let’s take advantage of this and go out and do something, otherwise we’ll starve to death.”

“You’re right. It seems like the military doesn’t have much food in their reserves either. Even now, the portions of food are a mere drop in the bucket.” Qing Shui analyzed. “The crackers can probably last longer than the canned food. I suspect the canned food will perish soon. At that time, we’ll be in the worst situation. We really should go out to look for our own food if we want to survive.”

“Although it’s dangerous outside of the base, the plants and animals are flourishing. I don’t think it will be a problem for us to find food in this situation.”

“I agree, the stems and branches of plants are edible, and so is animal meat. How about this...” Chang lowered his voice when he heard Qing Shui’s suggestion to go out to look for food. “Teacher, you’re more familiar with plants, so it won’t be a big problem for you to distinguish which one is edible. You can bring Pangzi and Lin to collect plants in and around the base. I’ll go out with Jing to see if we’re lucky enough to run into some small animals so that we’ll have meat for dinner. Hopefully, we’ll find something to eat if we split up this way.”

“You’re hunting by yourself?” Pangzi shook his head as he heard



Chang, “That’s too dangerous, bring me with you. I don’t know anything about plants anyways.”

“Well...since you’re chubby, you’ll become a big target. It’s not safe for both of us if you follow me.” Chang made a joke to turn down Pangzi’s kindness. “Go with Mr. Li, it won’t be too much of a problem for me as long as I’m with Jing.”

“No one can be sure about that.” Qing Shui shook his head too. “Jing didn’t detect the danger until the tentacle of the monster came out from the urinal.”

“He’s right.” Jing also shook her head. “I didn’t sense it until its tentacle reached out.”

“Does that mean that you sensing abilities can be blocked?” Chang frowned. “But that’s not a big deal, is it? After all, only a few monsters live underground. We’ll just look for animals around the base. Don’t worry, it shouldn’t be dangerous.”

“But...” Pangzi was going to express his concern, but Chang interrupted him. “That’s it, I’ll be going around the base with Jing to look for small animals. There’s no need to be sentimental; just wait for the big dinner tonight.”

Chang held onto Jing’s small hand as he spoke.

“Let’s go.” They walked out of the room and walked through the base; the world was still drowned in this mysterious red fog.

However, the base wasn't silent; it was filled with civilians because it was the time that the soldiers were distributing food. Even though the base wasn't bustling with noise and excitement, it wasn't as quiet as the outside world either.

They passed over the crowd and walked out of the base. Chang found out that there were still many civilians trickling into the base for shelter.

"The number of refugees is still increasing, and with that many people, the military will soon have many more problems." Seeing the stream of people peeking into the base, Chang pulled Jing aside to avoid the crowd.

Despite being in an apocalypse, there were barely any mutated organisms in this area. This was a phenomenon that other species had learned in order to avoid an excessive population that could threaten their survival. After all, it was part of an animal's instinct for self-preservation.

"We'll go around the base and try not stray too far from it. Jing, please tell me if there are any dangerous animals circling around us, as well as any large groups of small insects." Chang told Jing earnestly. "If you notice an organism that has a high danger index or is really big, hide first, then pat my back to let me know. I won't go too far from you."

"Understood," Jing nodded determinedly.

“Okay, let’s go.” Chang went out first and pulled out his scalpels and held one in each hand. They started hunting for the first time in their lives.

“Right now we’re at a pretty quiet area; it’s best not to move too far away from here, and make sure you pay attention and scout out dangerous creatures around here, since this is a large area.” Liu Chang led the little girl while reminding her, “if the danger value of a creature is too high or a large number of creatures appear, make sure to get yourself in a safe hiding spot, then we can’t signal each other by tugging on our clothes. I won’t leave you too far.”

“Our goal for hunting is to find an individual animal with a danger value of 1 or less. Is that clear?

“Yeah, I understand.” The little girl nodded energetically.

“All right, let’s go.” After finishing his sentence, Chang headed out. With the two scalpels in his hand, he had officially begun his first hunt.

## Chapter 25: Waiting

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Chang and Jing walked all the way towards the north. The military base was at the south of the city, so if they went further south, they would reach the uninhabited land.

There were very few people living in the area before the red fog, and now it was even more dangerous.

Therefore, Chang chose to go in the direction of the city center which was relatively safe compared to the south. However, Jing felt something unusual when they had just taken a few steps.

“Two 0.8 level organisms are approaching us.”

“0.8?” Chang squatted on his heels with Jing after he heard her and they hid in nearby bushes. “It seems we’re pretty lucky.”

Clenching the scalpels tightly, Chang carefully observed the surrounding through the grass.

“Are they right in front of us?” Chang pointed to the front with caution.

“Here, they’re moving slowly towards us.”

“Okay, thanks.” Chang nodded and held his breath.

Chang knew that even the slightest breath could reveal himself to animals that had acute senses. As a hunter, lurking was always an important skill.

Time passed by and Chang coped with his nervousness before the hunt by counting his own heartbeats.

When he reached a hundred, Chang saw the grass at the far front slightly shake, and then two figures showed up.

“Damn.” When Chang saw them, he swore with a low voice and stood up from the grass. “Jing, we don’t need to hide in the grass; they’re two humans.”

“Really?” Jing also stood up as she heard Chang, “Are they two girls?”

“Yes.” Chang looked at them in the distance. They looked like they were seventeen or eighteen years old. Chang’s voice scared them, but since they could only see within three meters, they didn’t know where Chang was.

“Who is it? Is someone there?” It was scarier for them when they could see nothing but the fog, they stood rooted and shouted.

“We are just passing by, don’t worry,” Chang responded.

“Let’s go.” Chang patted on Jing’s head after he replied. He didn’t even pay attention to what they said afterwards. He left

with Jing to look for a new prey.

However, the hunt didn't go as smoothly as they thought it would be; they had still not found any suitable prey even after three hours of searching.

Within the 3 hours, they had encountered other humans 17 times, detected organisms above level 5 15 times and had also managed to avoid large groups of insects three times. Unfortunately, they just didn't run into any prey they desired.

"It's passed noon, yet we still have nothing," Chang sighed. They sat on the curb and leaned on two-meter-high bushes.

"Tired?" He rubbed Jing's hair and asked.

"Yes, but I can bear with it." She nodded; the cut on the face had formed a scab. "Are you hungry, Mr. Liu?"

"Hahaha, don't call me that. I'm not that old for you to call me mister; I just graduated from high school." Chang laughed when he heard Jing. "I don't look that old, do I? Just call me Chang. And to answer your question, I'm very hungry!"

"I see... Fortunately, I hid a piece of food in my pocket." She took out a piece of the cracker from her shirt. "I didn't eat all the food I got; I have a piece leftover. You can have it, since you definitely need more strength to fight the animals."

“Hahaha...” Looking at the cracker, Chang laughed again. “I’m very surprised that you actually saved a small piece from that half pack of hardtack. I don’t believe that you were full from just eating that little. You have it yourself!”

“Uh...” Jing stared at Chang blankly as if she didn’t expect his answer. Her eyes revealed a look of astonishment, but her hands were still raised up stubbornly.

“Well, since this is from your kindness, I might as well take it.” Seeing her face, Chang couldn’t help but laugh. He took the cracker and stuffed it in his mouth.

The unique taste of hardtack filled his mouth.

“It tastes so good; I guess everything tastes good when you’re hungry.” He took a sip from the water bottle to moisturize his mouth. Chang stood up, “Let’s go, since I got a piece of cracker from you, I’ll make a return to you tonight with a piece of meat!”

“I’d love to have that.” Jing smiled happily at Chang.

In the afternoon, they’re bad luck gave them a hard time, but now their luck started to kick in.

They wandered around for 10 minutes and walked past a group of humans when they found their target – a stray dog.

It was a large dog that happened to be alone. Though it looked

like it had evolved due to the red fog, it didn't change as much as the other animals they encountered.

Level 1.5 was the information that Jing gave to Chang. That meant that the dog wasn't much stronger than an adult male. But due to its instinct, it was harder to deal with compared to humans.

Hence, Chang quickly and gently squatted down without saying anything – he knew how sensitive a dog's hearing was.

In the bushes, Chang waved and gestured at Jing to stay away. Then, he held his breath and took advantage of the tall grass as he slowly approached the dog.

However, things never went like he planned. Although he was extremely cautious, a slight creaking sound was made when he gently stepped on the grass.

This caused the dog to be alerted.

Its sensitive hearing immediately told it where Chang was at. A pair of scarlet eyes scanned around and finally locked onto Chang who was three meters away from it.

Its face distorted to show its fangs, and its throat surged and threatened Chang with a unique sound.

However, Chang was no longer that kid he was a few days ago. As one of the few humans who had undergone an evolution, though



he didn't have a significant physical improvement, he wasn't someone who was scared of a dog either.

Chang stood still and confronted the dog with his hands clenched. He didn't want to move first because he knew it was difficult to achieve the desired results due to how humans usually stood and moved.

Human were taller than dogs, but dogs were more flexible since they ran with four limbs. If he were to attack first, he needed to do many things, such as taking out his scalpels. These movements would cost his balance, and if the first strike wasn't successful, he would be gnawed by the dog.

In such circumstances, he wanted to wait for his opponent to attack first. With an animal's instinct, the dog would most likely attack his neck to choke Chang or damage his arteries. Even though it didn't want to attack Chang's neck, its instinct would still drive it to do so.

Chang believed in the dog's natural animal instinct.

Therefore, he was patiently waiting!

## Chapter 26: Slaughter And Fleeing

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The confrontation between the two sides went on for a long time, with both sides exerting caution. During this long battle, Chang had maintained his best attack position and was highly concentrated, waiting for the moment the stray dog attacked.

He pointed the scalpel's tip at 75 degrees and was ready to thrust it into his opponent's chest the moment it jumped on his body.

Chang knew that hunting was definitely not a contest. It would probably take a long time, but what determined life and death was at that critical moment. For both sides, the first attack would determine the winner of the battle, because the second attack would be much harder.

Therefore, as Chang stared at its scarlet eyes, it also did the same. A dog and a human stood still, not moving even the slightest bit.

In the end, Chang's patience beat the dog's. When his arm gradually became stiff because of how long he had kept his position, the stray dog leaped at him.

From its sudden leap into the air, the dog easily jumped over 2 meters; saliva was dripping from its teeth and as Chang predicted, it was aiming at his neck. This leap showed off its extraordinary jumping ability and strength.

His scalpel met a thin barrier as it pierced the dog's chest, then he felt a spring of warm liquid covering his fist. Chang knew that

he had successfully pierced the dog.

However, the dog didn't stop as it struggled and tried to bite Chang's neck. Hence, he pressed the blade forward with pressure – the warm and sticky feeling on his hand became even more intense.

His attack succeeded.

However, as he was delighted, he felt a surge of pain coming from his chest – although he avoided a fatal bite, it was inevitable that he was also injured by the dog's attack.

“Woo...”

“Ah...”

His groan and the dog's whine came together, then they both fell to the ground from the momentum.

As Chang fell, the back of his head hit the ground first. He immediately blacked out for a few seconds.

Although the stray dog was severely injured, he landed in a better position than Chang, so he recovered first. It shrugged off the pain coming from the long cut in its chest because its survival instincts told it to run away as far as it could with a painful whine.

“Sh\*t.” In that second or two, the dog almost disappeared in his sight. Chang laid on the ground and witnessed it fleeing into the thick grass. He immediately jumped up and chased after it.

With just a glimpse, he knew how much damage he dealt to the stray dog – that cut was about 15 centimeters from its chest to its stomach. Even though it wasn't severe enough that its organs would fall out, it was definitely a fatal wound. It shouldn't be able to run very far.

Chang was about to follow the trail of blood to look for the stray dog.

“Don't go after it, Chang!” Jing shouted in hurry.

“Why?” Chang didn't turn around, nor did he stop chasing. He followed the dots of blood, but he soon realized how much he had underestimated the running ability of the dog. Even though it was severely injured, it still wasn't the kind of animal that a human could catch up to.

But at this time, he wasn't in a hurry at all. After all, that cut was deep and long enough to cause blood to keep dripping onto the grass. No matter where it went, the trail of blood would sell it out.

Hence, Chang stopped – he was too far from Jing and was worried about her.

Jing showed up and breathed heavily, “Don't...don't chase after

it.”

“What do you mean by don’t chase after it?” Chang frowned.

“A level 8 animal went to where it disappeared.” Jing pointed at the trail of blood.

“Level 8?” Chang’s brows knotted tightly.

“Yes, and its moved very fast; it must be a large animal.” Jing closed her eyes, imagining what it looked like in her brain.

“How did it come? I thought it was only me and the dog.”

“Um... I guess it stayed outside my perception range and suddenly ran as fast as lighting.” She opened her eyes, “We should go; a level 8 animal is certainly much more powerful than us.”

“No...no! I can’t quit now. If we can’t get food now, we’ll become weaker very soon; I can just imagine us dying from starvation. This is our very first day, and my physical condition is at its peak. If we can’t obtain anything now, we won’t get anything the next few days either, and we’ll get hungrier. To be honest, the worst situation is that we all die; I would rather die under its paws than die from starvation.”

They were so close to getting some meat; nobody would be willing to give up at this point. Therefore, Chang pondered for a few seconds and stomped his feet. “Anyways, I have to see where it

went.”

“But...”

“Don’t worry about me. My perception is sensitive enough to allow me to observe from far away; it won’t notice me.” Chang parted the grass as he said so, “Don’t follow me and stay here. I’ll come back for you.”

Chang followed the direction of the blood. But just as the trail of blood grew larger to the size of puddles, he heard a crisp whine; this kind of whine was exclusive to dogs. It was the sound they emitted when they cried in pain.

Because the whine was so short and had ended abruptly, Chang knew – his prey had died.

There was no need to distinguish the blood on the grass. Chang rushed the sound, and finally, he saw that poor stray dog.

It was dead, and a giant white cat held its body with its mouth, with blood staining its white beard messily.

“What a large cat...” Standing seven meters away from the animal, he didn’t know whether he should’ve called it a cat or not.

It was a 4-meter long giant cat and had splendid white fur. With a quick glance, the cat was definitely larger than any tiger Chang had seen in his life. Its tail was long and furry; it was curled onto

its on tummy as if it was a delicate white pillar.

“Who? Who was the owner of this cat? They definitely didn’t keep an eye on their cat after the red fog. Damn, today isn’t a lucky day for me.” Chang completely gave up on his prey after he saw this giant creature. Unlike canines, felines were more flexible and better hunters. Their forearms were flexible enough to allow them to capture small animals with ease. The size of this cat and its possible mutations made it so strong that no one would doubt that it could fight against tigers. Clearly, Chang wouldn’t put his life at such a large risk.

Therefore, he helplessly watched as the giant white cat ran off with the dog dangling from the corner of its mouth. It jumped on a townhouse and soon disappeared into the red fog.

The iron law in the nature – the stronger one gets prey; Chang finally tasted the bitterness himself.

## Chapter 27: Wound

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“Son of a b\*tch...” Seeing the danger from the prey in its mouth, Chang roared the sky to release the rage and unwillingness in his heart.

Chang lighted up quite a bit after he shouted; his mind slightly relaxed. But now, the pain that was suppressed by his nerves had become sharp and obvious.

He looked down to his left chest – there were three long bloody scratches inflicted by the stray dog.

Fortunately, although the scratches were long, they weren’t deep. They were painful as if a fire was lit on his chest, but they weren’t fatal wounds.

Chang stood in the grass bush feebly. He felt like his body was completely drained. The intense hunt and that brief tension between the cat and him while facing extreme hunger made him feel particularly weak right now.

“Why...” He sat down as if he had lost all of his strength. Chang noticed small puddles of blood on the ground around him. “These might attract other predators...” He rested for a bit and immediately went back to look for Jing.

Chang found Jing still standing where she was.



“Are you okay?” She smiled when Chang showed himself from the bushy grass.

“I’m fine, but the dog was taken by another animal.” His face looked frustrated.

“Thank god, at least you’re still alive. We should head out from here as soon as possible.” Jing held his hand and trotted back towards the camp.

“Are some other monsters approaching?” Chang followed her and asked.

“I won’t say they’re monsters; there’s a massive amount of level 0.003 organisms coming. They might be small bugs.” Jing replied, “We should be careful anyways.”

“Okay.” They walked out from the bloody scene where they hunted the dog. The two found a small abandoned house. He found a basin to rinse off the blood on his hands. Then, in the other room he sprayed some strong scented perfume and hair spray to cover the smell of blood on his body.

Chang finally felt a slight relief after he did this.

“Should we keep going?” Jing dropped down beside Chang, with her weary little body curled up on the couch as she asked. “You were scratched by the dog; we should go back to the base to disinfect your wound.”

“These things happen all the time, don’t worry. Human resistance to bacteria and viruses is an evenly matched competition. If one prevails but doesn’t destroy the other completely, any subsequent infections would be less intense. Since I didn’t die from the last infection, I won’t die from this infection either,” Chang said determinedly. “Just to be safe, I’ll still take some antibiotics, but there’s no rush for it. I’ll take them once we go back.”

“So we will keep on hunting?” Jing rubbed at her ankle, then asked the question again.

“Yes, both of us are in a fairly good condition right now, if we don’t get anything today, it will be even more difficult tomorrow.” Chang looked up to the ceiling, “I’m a little bit dizzy from hunger. If we go back to the base right now and only get that half pack of biscuit, it’ll definitely not be enough. My reaction speed and fighting ability will be significantly reduced by tomorrow; it will be almost impossible for us to get anything.”

“I thought Mr.Li and Pangzi went out to find some edible plants.” Jing removed her shoes and socks while she spoke. She stretched out her ankle so that she could keep up with Chang in the next hunt. However, blisters and blood covered the bottom and sides of her feet. Seeing this made Chang upset.

Continuously walking for six or seven hours wasn’t something a skinny and thin teen girl could bear, not to mention that the path she walked didn’t have flat roads at all. The world returned to its natural state; the ground was filled with cracks, and it resembled a

dense forest. Luckily though, there weren't any rocks, concrete blocks, nails of any kind or industrial waste along the pathway. The roads in the city were completely shattered, and the ground was covered with all these obstacles. Even Chang himself had a hard time walking on it, while Jing was just a small girl.

"You can go back first, you must be tired. I can look for small animals by myself around here." Chang sighed as he glanced over her blistered feet.

"I can't go back now; it'll be hard for you to find a prey without me. Plus, what if you run into any serious danger..." She carefully put on her socks and lightly tuck her feet into her shoes. She offered a generous smile to Chang, "Let's go, I'm fine, they aren't hurting that much."

"Okay! Then we'll walk around for a while and see what happens." Chang nodded, lifted Jing with his hands and put her on his back. "Hold tight and tell me when you think there's a good prey."

"I will." Jing first struggled instinctively, but then she tightly held onto his back.

Chang opened the tattered door that was torn by the flourishing plants, and then their figures merged in the red fog bit by bit.

However, this afternoon wasn't like the things written in novels or screenplays; they walked around the area until they were fatigued. It was a fruitless afternoon.

As the sky was slowly getting dark, Chang dragged his exhausted body back to the military base, with Jing lying on his back. He slowly walked to the familiar room.

“We’re back.” When he reached the door, Chang put down Jing. When her feet touched the ground, her body was startled – it was a natural reaction from the pain of the blisters being pressed on.

Chang was relieved quite a bit as he put down Jing –he gained a stronger physique since he evolved and wasn’t as powerless as he used to be. Jing was light, about 50 pounds. But in the end, he was currently weak, so letting her go reduced quite a large amount of pressure on him.

When they opened the door, Qing Shui, Pangzi and Lin were sorting the cleaned plants.

“We’re back.” The sound of the door alerted the three in the room and they turned their heads towards Chang and Jing at the same time. Chang gave them a brief strained smile and threw up his empty hands. “Sorry...I didn’t get anything.”

“It’s okay, actually, Mr.Li was talking about how difficult it would be for you guys to hunt... Wait, you were wounded?” Pangzi stopped sorting the plants when he saw the long scratches on Chang’s chest. He stood up and took out some rubbing alcohol and cotton pads.

“They aren’t deep, don’t worry.” Chang took the rubbing alcohol

and cotton pad and poured it directly onto his wound, immediately causing him to feel a burning sensation. He clenched his teeth to reduce the pain and waited until the burning went down. Then, he used the cotton pads to absorb the blood gently. After doing all that, he pulled Jing over.

“I’ll be taking off your shoes, okay?” He let Jing sit on the bed. He saw a pair of blood soaked and hardened socks on her feet after he removed her shoes.

“The bloody blisters might have ruptured, causing her feet and socks to stick together.” Looking at her socks, Chang turned his head to Qing Shui. “Mr.Li, how should I handle wounds like this?”

“We should soak her feet in saline so that the clothes will separate from her feet.” Qing Shui stood behind Chang and handed a small plastic bowl to Lin who was still sorting the plants. “Please get some water for us. We don’t have saline, but we can make our own with table salt.”

“Sure.” Lin looked up at Qing Shui and took the plastic bowl. She left the room without looking at Jing’s blood-soaked feet.

“Don’t get it on the first floor!” Qing Shui was worried, “Get it from the higher floors where the monster’s tentacle can’t reach.”

“I know.” A response came from the hallway.

Shortly after, Lin returned with a full bowl of water. Qing Shui

added a small amount of table salt to the water and stirred. Chang held Jing's feet carefully and put them into the bowl.

“Hiss!” Her whole body shivered the moment her feet touched the salt water. She kept hissing and instinctively wanted to withdraw her feet from the salt water, but Chang pressed down her trembling ankles tightly.

## Chapter 28: Stench

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“I’m sorry, but this is the only way we can separate your socks from your feet.” Chang sighed.

He knew just how much it would hurt to rub salt on a wound, not to mention soaking her feet in salt water. Moreover, because there were more sensory nerves at the bottom of the feet, the pain that she was enduring was amplified even more than if this were a normal wound on her limbs.

In less than a moment, Jing’s face paled. However, Chang didn’t look at her face; instead, he paid attention to the socks on her feet.

The hardened blood on the sock slowly softened in the salt water, and the adhesion between the sock and the wounds on her feet began to loosen up. After a while, Chang lifted her feet and carefully peeled off her socks.

“Pour some alcohol onto her feet. We don’t need to wrap her feet in bandages, since those blisters need some fresh air to dry up.” Qing Shui continued to guide Chang behind him.

“I see.” He nodded and gently put her leg on the bedpost so that her feet wouldn’t touch the bed. Chang then took out some antibiotics from his backpack. He gave Jing a pill, and then he took another one.

“I’m really sorry you had to experience this...” Chang dropped himself on to the bed and covered his eyes with his arms after he

disinfected Jing's feet.

“How was it today?” Qing Shui returned to the pile of plants to sort them.

“It was hard; hunting was extremely difficult.” Chang stared at the base of the upper bunk bed and said. “The animals were too vigilant. I didn't even get close to them before I was discovered.”

“If hunting was that easy, there wouldn't have been a large number of human hunters that starved to death in ancient times.” Qing Shui chuckled and said, “If hunters were able to get a large prey, the money they could get from trading its fur and meat would be sufficient to cover their living expenses for a month or more. They could've been millionaires if every hunt was successful.”

“In fact, the hunter occupation isn't stable in the least; they often face hunger, and many die from starvation.” Qing Shui kept his hands busy and continued to explain. “It's not only human hunters; the top predators on this planet also face these difficulties. For example, of all land animals, leopards have the highest chances of acquiring prey, yet they only have a success rate of less than 1 in 7. Moreover, after each hunt, regardless of whether it's successful or not, they have a period of time where they can't consume any food because they burnout, which creates a significant burden for their body.”

“Therefore, even if they have the highest success rate in hunting, they often get robbed of their food.” Qing Shui picked out a strange grass from the pile of plants, sniffed it a few times and said, “What



I was trying to say is, it'll be hard to find food in nature even if you are a good hunter or a top predator. Animals lacking escape abilities or survival mechanisms have long been eliminated by the cruelty of nature. The ones who've survived are skillful and as you said, extremely vigilant. I'm going to hunt with you tomorrow. Anyways, I think the plants we picked today are enough to last for a few days."

"Sure, that's good," Chang rolled over in his bed and happened to see Qing Shui sniff at the plant. He asked, "Mr. Li, are you sure they're edible?"

"I don't know, they should be." Qing Shui's eyes revealed a look of skepticism. "These plants were definitely edible before the red fog, but now they seem to have developed some unique abilities."

"What unique abilities?" Chang frowned.

"The ability to prevent themselves from being eaten by other organisms." Qing Shui walked in front of Chang and squeeze some juice from the stem of the plant and smiled, "smell it."

"Ahh! Get it away from me please." The juice from the stem spurt on Chang's face and made him feel nauseous. "What is this? It smells worse than shit, are you really sure this is edible?"

"I'm sure of it." The choking smell caused Qing Shui to sneeze a few times. "The composition of these plants should be the same as before the red fog, but they've just become stinky. We'll boil them for longer, so at least we have something to eat."

Qing Shui picked up a pile of plants and stood up straight, “I’m going to the army kitchen to cook them. Does anyone want to come with me?”

“.....”

No one answered him; they didn’t want to go to the kitchen.

“I’ll be going by myself then.” Qing Shui wasn’t disappointed by the silence. He smiled and left the dorm room.

An hour later.

Qing Shui held a pot of vegetable soup and carefully pushed open the door with his back as he walked in.

“Oh god, it smells like the sewer.” All of them, including the other two families covered their noses as Qing Shui walked in.

“To be honest, I think the sewer smells way better than this.” Pangzi walked up to Qing Shui with his nose covered. “Mr. Li, are you really sure this is edible?”

“Hahaha, of course it is edible, I’ll tested it out myself first.” Qing Shui put the pot on a stool and picked a “vegetable” from the pot. He swallowed it without chewing evening chewing it. A bitter smile covered his face as he said, “It tastes just like it!”

“Really?” Chang got up from the bed and took a spoonful of the soup. The soup was warm, but a sudden taste of cooked feces filled his entire mouth and activated all of his taste buds in less than a second. He gagged several times because of the stench. Until he felt his gastric juices rise to the throat, he swallowed the soup using a great deal of effort while squeezing his nose tightly to reduce the horrible odor as much as possible. Chang choked when he smelled the stench, and tears and snot burst out, causing him to choke.

“It tastes just like the sewer!” Chang gave a thumbs-up to Pangzi while he was tearing up.

“All of you should have some, you know we don’t have any other choices. This is better than starving. I know it smells really bad, and the textures horrible too, but in the end it’s just vegetable soup.” Qing Shui distributed bowls to Chang and the others while he spoke and filled each bowl with the soup.

“Eat it all and don’t leave any leftovers. How many days has it been since we had a full meal? If we don’t endure the smell and eat it right now, within three days, someone will die.”

“Is it that serious?” Chang held his nose and drank a mouthful of the soup. With a mouth full of the stench, he asked “I don’t think somebody would die from starving for three days... If someone were to take that half pack of hardtack and lay on a bed, I think they’d be able to survive for more than ten days.”

“They wouldn’t die from starvation, but rather from other

diseases caused by extreme hunger.” Qing Shui fed himself big chunk of vegetables, but he still swallowed them without chewing too much. “What do you think our world has turned into? It’s rapidly changing, but for the past millions of years, bacteria and human’s resistance to them had been at an equal level. But now, they evolve much faster than we do. While they’ve been evolving, we haven’t, so our immune system has gradually become weaker and weaker from hunger. The result is obvious: we’ll get sick easily, and by that time, every breath we take could cause a serious bacterial infection.”

“So, according to what you’re saying, there will be people dying in the next few days?” Chang scooped up another spoonful of vegetables and looked around.

“Not only will people die, but it’ll also be on a very large scale!” Qing Shui sighed as he handed Lin a bowl of soup. “Eat it. The plants are evolving too; while it might taste like shit right now, in a few days, we won’t even have shit to taste.”

## Chapter 29: Human desires

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“I can’t imagine what the world would turn to if plants tasted worse than feces.” Chang reached for an empty bowl after he heard Qing Shui and filled it with the vegetable soup.

“Cheers for the sh\*tty vegetable soup!”

“That was a vulgar joke.” Pangzi who was standing beside Chang, furrowed his brows, and then went to get himself a bowl of soup.

Pangzi, Lin and Jing each took their own bowl. When they first smelled the soup, they simultaneously frowned with a disgusted face.

After a while, Jing braced herself for the first sip. As the soup stimulated her taste bud, her pale face turned white, but she managed to swallow the soup as her cheek went up and down. The first taste came strongly and swiftly, so Jing immediately held her nose as if she was drinking bitter traditional Chinese medicine. She didn’t chew on any vegetables in the soup so that she could finish her dinner as fast as possible.

Lin wanted to imitate Jing’s way of drinking, so she first held her nose and then took a deep breath. She gulped a mouthful of soup, but as the liquid flowed down to her esophagus, she dropped the bowl. What followed was intense vomiting.

“Blarghhhh..” the vegetable soup gushed out from her mouth and nose along with gastric juices, making the room smell even

worse.

“I’m sorry.” Lin basically threw up everything in her stomach. She wiped her mouth roughly and gave an apologetic look to the other four. She then picked up the broom and cleaned up her mess while her left hand lightly pressed on her stomach.

“Well...” Pangzi had just witnessed Jing and Lin attempt to gulp down their dinner. He tried to muster up his courage to eat it, but he eventually gave up after only a sip.

“No...I can’t chug it.” Pangzi put away his bowl, indicating that he wouldn’t touch the soup again.

“Humans are so fragile...” Qing Shui didn’t force them to finish their dinner as he saw their reaction. After finishing his own portion, he put down the bowl and closed his eyes to think.

Chang didn’t say anything about it either and quietly slurped the last bit of food in his bowl, as well as the rest in the pot.

Subsequently, Chang felt a strange yet comfortable warm feeling raising from his stomach. The smell in his mouth seemed to be become less intense – human suffering, regardless of what pain one experiences, will gradually lessen as one’s body begins to learn to adapt to it. Moreover, human bodies had evolved to an ideal state where excessive pain would cause a person to faint. However, if humans were unable to faint, the pain would slowly fade as time passed by; there were even some cases where people developed pleasure in feeling extreme suffering.

Therefore, human really were amazing creatures.

It seemed like Chang had suffered enough that the only sensation he had was the warmth in his stomach; it made him no longer feel hungry, and instead, he was relaxed and comfortable.

“How can you eat that much?” Lin saw the empty pot and asked. Her pale face made an admiration expression, “I couldn’t even take one sip.”

“If you can endure how disgusting the first sip is, everything becomes simple afterwards.” Chang replied honestly.

“I can’t even drink a drop of it.”

“I bet that in three days or even less, you’ll be able to endure the disgusting smell, and you’ll think that it’s delicious.” Qing Shui opened his eyes and joined their conversation and smiled, “After all, humans aren’t as delicate and picky as we thought. The desire for food will overtake any other feelings we have.”

“I don’t believe you!! I won’t eat this until the day I’m dead!” Lin retorted. “I’d rather die if I have to eat this sh\*t to appease my hunger.”

“You aren’t willing to eat this because you’ve never tasted the feeling of real hunger. To those who’ve faced famine before, they know how low humanity can go in order to find food. Sexual desire

is derived from the craving for reproduction, but the desire of food is essential to survival. All animals or plants need to resolve their hunger before even thinking about reproducing. Therefore, our desire for food is a thousand times greater than our lust for sex.”

“A truly hungry person is worse than a person who’s been fed an aphrodisiac potion. The latter would hunt for the opposite sex as long as they’re available, but the former would take everything as long as they could stuff their stomach. In ancient times, it wasn’t uncommon for people to strip bark for food; when people were hungry enough, even if the only food available was poisoned, they would still eat it to satisfy their hunger.” Qing Shui stood up and laid back on to his bed. “Hence, I won’t push you to have the vegetable soup, but sooner or later, you’ll have to eat.”

Qing Shui closed his eyes again after he finished speaking. Apparently, he was the type of person who knew how to conserve energy.

Chang did the same as Qing Shui; he went back to his bed when Qing Shui was speaking – even though his stomach was full of vegetable soup, in the end it was just a liquid. Without carbohydrates and protein, this meal couldn’t replenish his full strength.

Therefore, conserving energy became critical to ensure survival.

As Chang and Qing Shui stopped talking, Jing remained silent as she huddled up beside Chang; Lin and Pangzi didn’t respond either as they heard Qing Shui. The five of them sunk into a brief silence.



The other two families kept silent as they were listening. One of the families had lost their son, but because the authorities didn't take their case seriously, they started to blame Chang and his party by giving them occasional glares, but the overwhelming and distressing atmosphere kept their mouths shut.

As for the other family, they were in an even more dire situation. The parents of the young woman seemed to be sick; their hunger and stress, along with their old age had caused them to become weaker. Their daughter gave her single bed to her parents and she stood next to the bed to look after them silently.

Chang obviously knew what happened to that family as he slept beside them. However, he didn't plan on giving up his bed. Despite how incapable he felt in helping others in this new world, he had gotten a taste of how difficult hunting and finding food was today. Lying on a bed was much softer compared to the ground, and this was the only thing that could help him recover some strength. Good strength meant a higher chance of survival. It would be impossible for him to give his chance of survival to others, even though the pair of sick elders made him feel really bad.

Despite there being three "families" and eleven people in the single room, no one spoke after that.

The sky turned completely dark – in this new world, everyone knew that the night concealed uncountable dangers. Hence, no one dare to go out at this time.

Chang opened his eyes and took a quick look at the dark and red world again before he went to sleep. He kept his hand to pat Jing's back so that she could relax her nerves. They both slowly slid into their dreams.

“Are you accompanying me tomorrow, Mr.Li?”

“Yes, I am.”

These were the last words that gloomy night.

## Chapter 30: Preparation

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The next morning when the first ray of light illuminated the world, the darkness gradually faded into the bloody red chaos. The people in the room opened their eyes as morning arrived.

It was a long night for everyone, and the people who went to sleep hungry felt even worse. Chang pushed himself up a little in his bed and he looked at the other families in the room – they looked like a group of ravenous wolves.

Chang also felt hunger in his stomach; every bit of the vegetable soup has been absorbed by his body. The feeling of hunger was so bad that it felt like a black hole in his stomach, and all of his attention and desire for food were directed to this single spot.

Hence, he decided to do something so that he wouldn't need to think of food all the time.

“Will the military be distributing food today?” Chang sat up and asked while putting on his shoes.

“Maybe, but the portion will definitely be smaller than yesterday's.” Qing Shui also sat up in his bed. He stared at Chang's shoes and asked abruptly, “Is it possible for you to walk outside without your shoes?”

“What do you mean?” Chang loosed the shoelaces that he had just tied, removed his shoes and rubbed the bottom of his left foot. “I don't know how well I'll do with the cement blocks and rocks on

the road...”

“I’m talking about going hunting together today.” Qing Shui walked around in the room with bare feet and said, “It’s because we are going to face different kinds of animals and their hearing is much more sensitive than a human’s. For example, a dog’s sense of hearing is 16 times greater than a normal human; the sound of our shoes touching the ground is probably too loud, so it doesn’t help us when we try to approach them.”

“Indeed.” Chang also stepped on the ground with bare feet; he could immediately feel the coldness of the ground from the bottom of his feet. “If I were to walk for a long time in the grass and bushes, it wouldn’t be a good idea; but if it’s just for a short while, it should be fine.”

“That’s good; try not to tie your shoelaces too tight. Once we find our prey, you can take off your shoes to reduce the sound you make.” Qing Shui nodded and put on his shoes, and then he turned his head to the other three people. “You guys wait here for food distribution; we’re going out to make a weapon.”

“Weapon?” Pangzi looked confused.

“Yes, a weapon will increase our chance of getting a prey significantly.” Qing Shui explained when he picked up his backpack. “Chang, put on your shoes first, we’re getting a spear.”

“Got you.” Chang nodded. He put on his shoes and followed Qing Shui to the world outside of the base.

The following 2 hours, the two had found a wrecked courtyard around the military base. This kind of courtyard was very common in small cities. It was enclosed by a wall and had an iron fence on the wall to prevent people from trespassing. The iron fence consisted of welded steel bars, each having a pointy tip.

These steel bars looked like unfinished and unpolished spears, they were exactly the type of materials that could be made into a weapon. They walked around the wall and tried to pull on every iron bar to see if one of them could be loosened. Qing Shui found one that wasn't welded securely, and the two worked together to pull it out from the fence. Chang sharpened the tip against the wall while Qing Shui carefully wrapped the bar with green ivy so that it looked similar to the surroundings.

After two hours of work, Chang finally had a green spear in his hands. Although it wasn't made as well as a real spear, it would still help Chang a lot in this new world. The spear was about 160 centimeters long, and the width was about two fingers, and it weighed about 15 pounds.

“This will be much more helpful when hunting than using your scalpels; first, this spear is long enough – one of the most difficult things in hunting is approaching your prey, so it would definitely be easier for you to shorten the distance between you and your prey. Second, fighting big animals won't be as scary and dangerous as before, since you can kill them with this spear.” Qing Shui nodded with satisfaction when he saw Chang hold the spear.

“I agree with you. If I were fighting the dog from yesterday with

this, I probably wouldn't have even gotten injured." Chang nodded determinedly. Obviously, he agreed with Qing Shui's thoughts.

"Let's go back to the base. It has been almost 3 hours; the military should be sending food around now."

"Sure." Chang tightly clenched the spear showing how much cherished his weapon as the two found their way back to the base.

When they walked into the base, the spear in Chang's hand caught the crowd's attention – the base was extremely crowded and a lot of them didn't get accommodated into the buildings and hangars. Almost everyone in the crowd showed their interest in Chang because he was holding a spear; some stared at him as if they were deep in thought while others took a glance and lost interest. However, everyone could guess the purpose of Chang making this spear.

Food.

Because of their hunger, everyone's minds were almost controlled by their stomachs. Although Chang's look obviously revealed that he was a hunter, even if his appearance wasn't so obvious, in the eyes of these hungry people, as long as it could be linked to food, they could make a connection in their minds. Therefore, when they saw someone go out, this idea immediately came to mind in some people.

However, Chang had been lived in an urban area for his entire life, and so did these people; they had no idea how hard it was to

hunt for something in this bloody world.

“I was thinking that the most difficult part hunting isn’t fighting, but rather looking for a suitable prey. The time we spend on searching for a prey is much longer than the actual fighting.” Qing Shui and Chang were exchanging useful knowledge about hunting while they walked to their dorm room. “In other words, searching is harder than capturing. But fortunately we have Jing, so the most difficult part has become relatively easy for us.”

“I agree.” Chang nodded as he glanced at the crowd. Chang obviously knew what Qing Shui was talking about because what he was hinting at was obvious. Qing Shui was saying that they didn’t need to worry about other people in the city who might interfere with their hunt since they simply couldn’t find prey.

“But if more people go out for hunting, even if they don’t know how to find their own prey, there’s still a chance they’ll disturb us.” Chang lowered his voice, “Plus, if we succeed in our hunt, we still need to be careful to prevent other people robbing us. It’s natural that they’ll be jealous if they can’t find anything.”

“I know, that’s why we need to stay low key and protect our future gains.” The two walked to their room while they talked. When they reached the door, they stopped talking and pushed open the door.

“You’re back!” The sound of the door opening and closing had attracted everyone’s attention in the room. Jing’s face was full of joy and could be heard in her voice. “They’ve sent out some food! However, the portion is smaller than yesterday’s, and they’ve

seemed to run out of canned food; there's only a small piece of hardtack for each of us."

She limped towards Chang and showed off the two pieces of hardtack in her hand – one was smaller than the other. She said, "this is your portion."

"Jing, this is more than one piece of hardtack." Chang looked at the two pieces in her hand and frowned, "Did you not finish yours again?"

"The piece of hardtack was too big for me; I'm full. You can have my leftovers." Jing smiled.

"But..."

"Take it; you're the main force of today's hunt." Qing Shui interrupted Chang's hesitation. He said, "I'll carry her on my back today. Her feet haven't recovered well enough for her to walk. If she does, she could get a serious infection or even get necrosis. She shouldn't use too much strength."



# Chapter 31: Art Of Hunting

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“What about you?” Chang didn’t argue too much after he heard their conversation. He knew that kindly refusing wouldn’t be beneficial to anyone in this situation.

“You will get tired easily if you’re going to carry her on your back.”

“Don’t worry about me, I know how to save my strength. Plus, I’m not the main force of the battle like you; I probably won’t even get involved in the battle.” Qing Shui said as he picked up his portion of hardtack that was in front of Pangzi and ate it along with a glass of tap water.

Chang didn’t add more to this conversation as he saw Qing Shui’s determination, so he put the piece of hardtack in his mouth followed by some cold water.

When the dry and hard cracker encountered the water in his mouth, it immediately expanded. All of a sudden, the intense aroma filled his entire throat and nasal cavity; in three seconds, the mushed cracker had slid down to his stomach; the brief process was as splendid as firework set off in the sky. The satisfaction he gained from the moment that the cracker reached his stomach caused his mind to go blank for a few seconds.

“It was absolutely delicious!” Chang praised. A heartfelt admiration raised in his mind, “I’ve never had such delicious food in my life!”

Chang glanced at the smaller piece of hardtack in his hands and a spark of hesitation flared in him. He looked at Jing and then the cracker; he felt very conflicted at this moment – he knew the perseverance she had to exert to resist the temptation of having that piece of cracker after he had his piece of hardtack.

Because Chang knew that she wouldn't take back her cracker for any reason, he cherished that she offered her food to him – Chang stared at the small piece of hardtack and Jing's eyes for a few seconds before swallowing it.

“I promise you that our dinner will have meat!” Chang didn't say anything sensational other than this simple line, and he lightly rubbed on Jing's hair.

“I believe you.” Jing gave him the same answer as she did before – smiling and nodding.

“All right, lets go. If we don't get anything today, there is no hope for us to go out tomorrow.” Qing Shui had packed his backpack as Chang finished his food.

He carried his backpack in front of his chest and grabbed a handful of shriveled plants that they didn't finish yesterday, then he crouched down in front of Jing and let her climb on his back.

“Let's go.” Chang gave a warm smile to Jing; he could tell that she wasn't very comfortable staying on Qing Shui's back. Chang lightly patted her shoulder a few times to show that he would

accompany her. Then, the three left the room.

“We’ll come back before sunset if we are lucky.” The three left with one last sentence, but the second half of it sneaked through the door, “But we also might not be able to come back if today is just not our day.”

The trio merged into the red fog as they walked out from the base. The outside world was much more quiet and the plants were flourishing more than ever before. It was unlikely that someone would run into them and notice Chang’s strange weapon.

“Mr. Li, why are you holding those terrible plants?” Chang didn’t need to lower his voice when talking as they went outside already; he was comfortable speaking to Qing Shui in the red fog.

“To cover up the smell of your body,” Qing Shui said so as he let Jing get off of his back. He hunkered down and grounded the stems of the plants on the rough surface of a rock. What came out was a sticky and mushy liquid. He smeared some of the liquid paste on his arms, “I know you used perfume to cover the smell of yourself, but that isn’t a flawless camouflage at all.”

“So you want to use these plants instead?”

“Exactly, since the sense of smell of our targets are usually better than us. For example, do you know how many times better a dog’s sense of smell is compared to us?”

“I don’t know, probably more than a hundred times?” Chang guessed.

“It’s more than 1000 times; it actually falls anywhere between 1000 to 10000 times depending on the breed, so how far away do you think a dog can smell you?” Qing Shui kept grounding the plant stem and rubbed the stinky paste on his body. He then gently applied the paste on Jing’s arms and face.

“I don’t know... but I can’t even notice a dog approaching me by smell.” It was the first time that Chang knew how sensitive a dog’s sense of smell was. Though he was astonished by the fact, he also smeared the paste on his body like how Qing Shui did.

“Therefore, put more of this paste onto your body; it will be easier for you to approach a prey with better camouflage. These plants have an intense stench that comes from nature. This is a perfect disguise compared to those artificial perfume scents.”

“I see. But isn’t a dog’s sense of smell much better than other animals? Realistically speaking, how do other animals compare?” Chang picked up the spear again as he made sure the paste covered his exposed skin.

“Dogs are pretty average in terms of smell compared to other animals, like cats and rats. It’s just the fact that other animals aren’t as common as these domestic animals, so animals in nature are greatly understudied. But knowing less about them doesn’t mean they are incapable.” Qing Shui reorganized the tools he brought with him in the backpack, and then let Jing stay on his back again. “We should keep walking, we’ll discuss more as we

walk.”

“Good.” The trio headed to the downtown of the city.

“As we hunt, we should be careful of three things in order of importance – smell comes first, then hearing, and lastly vision. In terms of vision, you have the green paste on your body and the fog, and the grass is a perfect cover for you. Some animals are more sensitive to movement than to colors, so they usually won’t be able to notice you when you are lurking. Hence, just be more careful when you do move; if they become alerted, hold your breath and freeze your movements immediately until they let down their guard.”

“For hearing, you should breath as gently as you can and try to stabilize your heartbeat. Also, don’t forget about your footsteps. You need to be very calm to control your body to move in the exact way that you want it to.” As Qing Shui spoke, he suddenly grinned, “This is probably the ‘killing intent’ that’s always described in novels. It seems like a good hunter would be a good killer too.”

“As for smell, although I did my best to make you a camouflage, you still need to pay extra attention in case they can still sense you. You have to test out the direction of the wind. Don’t forget to get around to the position against the wind, so that you have lower chance of being discovered. And...” Qing Shui was about to lecture more, but Chang interrupted him.

“Mr. Li, as I have been listening to you, a strange thought popped in my head all of a sudden.”

“What are you thinking?”

“Compares to hunting, killing people is such a simple thing to do!”

## Chapter 32: Real Hunting

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“I agree with you. To be honest, humans are too civilized and pretty dull with regards to the five senses compared to other animals. If you manage to succeed in hunting even just once, killing a person will be much easier.” Qing Shui didn’t refute what Chang said; instead, he continued on this topic. “The world is in total chaos now. It’d be helpful for you to acquire hunting skills. Getting involved in fighting is inevitable, and those skills could be the key to our survival in the future.”

“Yeah.” Chang nodded. He fully understood the dullness of the human senses from the experience of him killing those thugs.

Human vision wasn’t bad in the animal kingdom, but smell and hearing were much worse than other animals. In the dense fog, having relatively good vision wasn’t as useful as in normal conditions. Chang still remembered how he used the fog as cover to kill those poor thugs on the street. They didn’t hear or smell Chang at all, and without having any vision on him, they were as helpless as old men.

“Did you have a mutation?” Qing Shui changed the topic all of a sudden. “A mutation like Jing has; she developed a new ability, so did you perhaps enhance your body?”

“I think so.” Chang answered, “But how do you know? I don’t recall ever talking about the changes in my body.”

“I don’t know what’s happening either; these days my mind has

become clearer, and somehow I'm remembering memories from a long time ago – even things that happened when I was a baby. I can analyze everything better and faster than before.” Qing Shui talked slowly, “For example, when we were walking together, you moved a step to the left and after 4 meters, I saw that on the track you were on originally, a tree was going to get in your way. It is so strange to me that I have come to the conclusion that your vision is at least two times better than me.”

“If it was before, I won't be able to notice these small details. But now, even a slight change is apparent as if you have taken a big step out of sudden. I also noticed that every time you stepped forward, you were faster than me and you didn't seem out of breath even though we had been walking for quite some distance. From all of my observations, I realized that your strength was greater than mine, and all these pointed to one answer – you had undergone a mutation and evolved.”

“I'm sorry I didn't tell you guys about it before.”

“Its fine; after all, our relationship was merely teacher and student a few days ago. It was totally normal that you didn't say anything about it.” Qing Shui didn't stop his footsteps for even a second, and the fog flowed by him as he walked. “Now that we share life and death, let's face this world together. Our ancestors only survived because they united as a single group.”

Chang gave Qing Shui a smile and continued to ask, “Three of us have mutated in different degrees and aspects. Does this mean that humans are entering a period of evolution?”



“Maybe; human have always considered themselves as one of the most complex organisms, so reasonably we should be the last to mutate or evolve. In more than 5 billions years, humans as a species have gotten lucky and evolved. As a result, we became able to think and imagine, which are probably unique types of intelligence as far as I know. But actually, on the genetic scale, we share a lot of common genes with the rest of the animal kingdom. I mean, we aren’t that different from the other animals, so it might be time for humans to evolve or mutate too.”

“Do you think everyone of us will mutate?” Chang asked.

“I would say that is possible, but we would evolve to different degrees. That is to say, that might be another validation of the Darwinian theory,” Qing Shui sighed. He suddenly looked down on the ground as if he knew something was there before he saw it. “Wait, here is some fresh excrement from some kind of animal, let me check.”

Qing Shui squatted as he spoke and carefully distinguished the hair and footprints around the feces. A moment after, he raised his head confidently and said, “We should go southwest. A dog just left from here and we can handle its size.”

“Another dog?” Chang exclaimed gently.

“What else can you think of? Cats, dogs and rats are the most common animals you would see in a city.” Qing Shui picked up the pace. “Jing, let us know immediately if you notice something turn up within 100 meters.”

“I will,” She responded.

Five minutes later.

“Three living organisms have stepped in my range, and their danger indexes are 1, 1 and 8 respectively.” Jing whispered in a quick manner, causing Chang and Qing Shui to stop spontaneously.

“What?!”

“Holy...”

They expressed their shock at the same time when they heard the number 8.

“Shhhh... wait, that level 8 seemed to have walked away.” Jing closed her eyes and carefully sensed the atmosphere, “It left my perception range.”

“Did it go far?” Chang was delighted as Jing said so.

“I don’t know, I can’t feel it at all.”

“Let’s go closer.”

“Sure.” Jing and Qing Shui nodded, and then they moved forward about 20 meters.

“It seems to have gone away.” Jing shook her head, indicating that she still didn’t detect the level 8 organism.

“Maybe we should wait for a minute or two. Perhaps it is wandering around and will come back very soon,” Qing Shui started to walk around Jing in a big circle.

“It isn’t here.” Chang and Qing Shui walked around for more than 10 minutes, but there was still no sign of the horrifying organism.

“We shouldn’t wait for it any longer.” Chang slowly raised his hand and casually grabbed a handful of sand from the ground. “I’m going to check out those two level 1 organisms. Stay about 90 meters away from them and don’t move, or they might become alerted.”

As Chang spoke gently, he put his hands up in the air and opened his palms. The wind carried the fine sand away and Chang found the direction against the wind.

He then removed his shoes and gently stepped on the ground. The small rocks and cement blocks caused him to feel pain on the bottom of his feet, but once he got used to the pain, he ran toward his prey swiftly and silently.

Chang was going in the direction that against the wind, and once he got closer, his footsteps slowed down.

Thirty meters, twenty meters, ten meters.... every step he took was full of consideration and caution as he gingerly snuck through the gap between the grass and bypassed the rubble. In a moment, he finally found where they were.

There was an open space in the grass; two dogs were lying there quietly. Although they were quite bulky and looked stronger than normal, their size wasn't as big as the cat that Chang saw the other day. They were pretty small compared to the white cat. Chang wasn't afraid of them as he had his spear in his hand.

But he still refrained from getting too close to his prey – after learning about their extremely sensitive sense of hearing and smell, he didn't think they were easy to approach.

Crouching in the bush, Chang took a few deep breaths and started to imagine the scene of the sky and ocean that cooled him down. He took quite the effort to suppress his racing heartbeat from his anxiety.

One... two...

After the third long and silent breath, Chang finally restrained his emotions, and his heartbeat gradually slowed down and his body no longer trembled after the surge of epinephrine wore off in his bloodstream. He entered a relatively calm state.

## Chapter 33: Pursuit

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Clenching the spear tightly in his right hand, Chang had the urge to hunt as if he was a cheetah hiding behind the grass. He was waiting quietly and patiently until the moment his prey lowered its guard.

This time he was lucky that he only had been lurking in the bushes for a while before he found a good opportunity – two wolfhounds were playing around and they both turned away, exposing their backs and black thick tails to Chang.

“A good hunter knows how to lurk, but what he knows better is to seize every fleeting opportunity he has to attack.”

In this moment, Qing Shui’s words flashed across Chang’s mind; without any hesitation, he took advantage of this perfect opportunity and carefully and swiftly moved forward towards his prey, and then shouted. He pushed off his legs like a hound to reach his greatest speed.

“Hah!” The wolfhounds were startled by the aggressive roar and turned to Chang at the same time with their tails tucked between their legs. Surprisingly, they didn’t run away – it was a natural response for animals. They were shocked and frozen by the sudden threat.

The shout also granted Chang a perfect chance. Jumping up high widened his vision, so he chose the stout wolfhound and pierced through it with his spear from top to bottom.

This action made a muffled sound; it was an attack with all his strength, so the spear poked through its skin and penetrated its organs and finally broke through the skin on the other side of its stomach. The wolfhound was firmly nailed to the ground as the tip of the spear deeply thrust into the ground.

“WOOOO!!” The wolfhound screeched and instinctively began to struggle furiously. Despite blood spurting from its mouth, it still tried to bite Chang’s ankle.

This kind of desperate struggle was part of an animal’s natural instinct. Chang immediately jumped back and left the wounded wolfhound where it was. Chang took out the scalpels from his back pocket and turned to the other wolfhound.

“Arf! Arf!” The unwounded wolfhound didn’t go away as it saw Chang back off. It didn’t attack Chang either, but it barked loudly as if that threatening tone would scare Chang away.

However, Chang wasn’t affected by its barking as he knew he could hunt this wolfhound too. His fingers rubbed on the handle as he was figuring out a safe way to capture the weaker wolfhound.

As if the wolfhound knew what Chang was thinking, it made a quick glance at its companion and fled after a few long threatening barks. Chang was surprised that it abandoned its partner, which meant that this probably wasn’t the dog’s habitat. However, the hunger stopped him from thinking further. Even if he was able to kill the other one, the extra meat would easily rot in this hot

weather and with the evolving bacteria. It would only take two or three hours for the meat to rot.

The wolfhound he got weighed about 100 pounds; it was absolutely more than enough for the five of them.

Therefore, Chang was delighted from the bottom of his heart. The desire for meat had temporarily occupied his mind. He walked up to the wolfhound that was nailed to the ground and impatiently stabbed the dog with his scalpel into its neck.

One, two... after 30 seconds, the dog died from excessive blood loss; the blood spurted out from its artery and coated Chang's sleeve.

After he finished that, Qing Shui, with Jing on his back, rushed to the scene.

“Jing just told me that a living being, which wasn't you left her perception range; with the signal of the other organism suddenly disappearing, I knew you succeeded.” Qing Shui put down Jing and took out a giant garbage bag from his backpack. He then took Chang's scalpel and said, “Give me your scalpel, I'll dissect this beast. You can put the meat in the plastic bag, and be careful not to get more blood on your body.”

“Okay.” Chang opened the garbage bag and looked at how Qing Shui skillfully dismembered the wolfhound into chunks of flesh. The whole process was short, and what was even more amazing was that the way he cut the wolfhound kept the blood from oozing.

“Bag them quickly; the smell of blood is too strong and I’m afraid that it will attract danger.” Qing Shui wiped off the sweat on his forehead by lightly pressed his sleeve on it.

“Will do.” Chang was deeply amazed by his technique. He stuck those pieces into the black garbage bag – if he were to put everything into the bag, it would be too heavy for them to carry. Chang had a hard time choosing which piece to take, and once he finished, the backpack was stuffed with the meat Qing Shui cut.

“Alright, come on!” Chang “cleaned” himself with some plant juice that he squeezed from the plants around him, and then picked up the spear and let Jing lay on his back. The trio left the scene with hearts filled with joy.

“I didn’t expect such a harvest today.” On the way to the base, Qing Shui, Chang and Jing were so excited that they finally laughed for the first time since the red fog appeared.

“It was lucky for us.” Qing Shui said. “I wasn’t expecting such a success in the first hunt with you either. However, the meat is too much for us, and honestly we can’t eat too much right now, since we have been starving for days. A sudden large consumption will easily make us sick.”

“But if we don’t eat it, it will perish in two or three hours.” Chang felt pity for the amount of food that would go to waste.

“Well...we don’t have access to a refrigerator or something that



can keep it longer. How about this, let's try to trade some of the meat with the military for hardtack. The crackers can last longer than the meats. Plus, the military must be starving too. With the amount of soldiers they have, they definitely won't mind doing business with us." As Qing Shui spoke, he lightly pinched his chin.

"But if we were to trade with them, they'll probably interrogate us, won't they? It could be troublesome and risky." As an ordinary person, he didn't like to deal with the authorities – he would likely suffer losses as the military was in control of the shelter and safety; they were still relying on the military for providing a place to stay.

"I'll try to avoid any trouble that might come up..." Qing Shui fell in silence as he dropped his voice, apparently he was wondering how to avoid trouble.

The three stopped talking. Their pace to the base was fast. When they got closer to the base, Jing suddenly sprang up.

"Chang!!!! Something is coming for us and... and they're extremely fast! One is level 8 and... a level 1 is following it." Jing hastily finished reporting this startling information. Both Chang and Qing Shui's heart sunk; they wanted to run faster so that they could get into the base. But as she finished speaking, Chang heard a noise come from the bushes behind them.

How fast can a person run 100 meters? Before the apocalypse, there were people who could run the distance in 10 seconds, so now people could definitely do it.

But how fast could a dog run? It wouldn't be a surprise that most of them could run that distance within 10 seconds; with the possible mutations and evolution, it made perfect sense that their current speed could reach 5 or 6 seconds per 100 meters.

Therefore, at the same moment that the muscle on Chang's leg contracted when he ran his first step, a dark shadow flew over his head; a gigantic wolfhound steadily landed in front of him after leaping from his back.

The path to the base was blocked. Chang immediately stopped so that he wouldn't run into it, and then he raised the spear and carefully scanned his enemy.

It was a giant dog.

But how giant it was actually?

It stood on four limbs and was bigger than the bears in the forest. Perhaps dogs were usually bigger than cats, but this dog was even bigger than the white cat they previously ran into. Its face was grim and its limbs were stout. The dog showed its anger by growling deeply; its teeth were exposed in the air and every single tooth was as long as Chang's finger.

From a single glance, Chang knew that if he were to fight against this dog – he would be torn apart!

## Chapter 34: Pus

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While Chang was observing his giant enemy, another wolfhound ran out from the bush. As soon as it stood in front of Chang, it gave a loud and short bark, leading the giant dog's attention to Chang.

“So it's a revenge.” He glanced at that small wolfhound – it was the one who fled; or more accurately, it didn't flee, it went to find someone to back it.

“Jing, leave with Mr. Li. The wolfhounds are only here for me.” Chang slowly lowered his body so that Jing could climb off his back. He clenched the spear even tighter – after all, that was the only weapon he had that could possibly save him.

Jing clearly knew that she would be a burden for Chang if she stayed, so once she jumped off his back, she went to Qing Shui. Surprisingly, the whole process didn't distract the giant dog's attention from Chang a single bit.

“Mr.Li, leave with Jing! Even with the three of us, we still can't even take one slap from it.” Holding the spear, Chang gradually felt sadness overcome his heart. In this situation, he would definitely die. As he slowly accepted this fact, his sadness slowly turned into solemnness. For the first time in his life, he decided to do something heroic.

“I'll deal with it, so just run as far away as you can,” Chang sighed.

“Sure.” Qing Shui’s answer was so simple that it completely ruined the heroic atmosphere. Then, Qing Shui lifted Jing and without looking back, they disappeared into the fog. Although Chang was solemn and Jing was crying, it didn’t matter to him at all as he ran as fast as he could.

“... He really rational, but sometimes his calmness scares me.” Seeing the figure of Qing Shui slowly fade into the fog while he stood still in front of this beast, Chang felt that the fog had unprecedentedly become bloody.

“So this is it.” Confronting the two twisted-face wolfhounds, Chang didn’t know whether he should runaway or fight them – if he chose to flee, he would definitely be slower than this giant beast. However, if he chose to fight, he would be extremely small and fragile in front of this monstrous dog.

Being so close to death, he knew that he had to face these cruel choices, despite neither of them being desirable.

Fortunately, Chang didn’t need to spend more time on making a difficult decision – his opponent made the first move.

It literally rushed towards Chang as if it was going to crash into him.

Chang completely abandoned any thoughts in his mind. Facing the black shadow running at him, he raised his spear in front of his chest horizontally as defense.

Bang!

The spear was strong enough to block the first strike, but it was bent into a V shape when the wolfhound collided with him. Chang wasn't able to bear such a powerful attack, and his arms went numb upon receiving this shock and subsequently, he let go of the spear. The shock was so great that he flew back three meters and rolled into the bushes.

Almost at the same time he fell on the grass, the smaller wolfhound leaped forward and firmly bit him; its sharp and hard teeth ripped off his long pants and poked through his skin, slowly burying into his muscles.

"Ahhhhh, f\*ck!" the extreme sensation of piercing pain made him fight back. He kicked away the small wolfhound, but the giant beast pushed aside the bush and started its second attack.

"Son of a b\*tch!" The giant wolfhound attacked from the behind this time, and while Chang flipped over on the grass to dodge, he also sliced open its front paw with his scalpel; although the cut wasn't deep at all, he unfortunately enraged the beast even more.

The wolfhound howled loudly and its mouth snarled widely to try to snap off Chang's head; Chang clearly knew that if the beast ever caught him in its mouth, he would most likely be separated into two pieces.

The force of this wolfhound should have increased according to its size, so one bite would be fatal no matter where it bit him.

Therefore, he was ducking in and out from the bushes as if it was a cat-and-mouse chase. Chang's body wasn't as weak as it used to be, but the size of beast was much larger than him. He somehow managed to run around without getting caught, but because of the difference in their stamina, getting caught was just a matter of time.

Struggling with death was painstaking; he knew he was going to die soon, but he didn't know when. However, Chang never thought of giving up on his life, which was why the stress of dodging and hiding became torturing both physically and mentally.

However, the merciful god was kind enough to open a path to life for him – when he was tumbling around, he saw a manhole cover of a sewer on the pavement. It wasn't round and there was a bulge at the center; it was probably destroyed from the inside.

A manhole cover meant that there must had to be a sewer. Chang looked around in panic, and sure enough, there was a dark shadow beside the cover in the grassy bush.

The dark shadow was very dazzling at that moment and made Chang desperately want to get into it. In those few seconds, he put himself in a risky situation where he might've been bitten by the small wolfhound, but he crawled towards the shadow and tumbled into the world of stench.

As he fell into the sewer, the huge head of the giant wolfhound

also chased after him; it tucked its head into the relative small hole as it wanted to catch Chang. However, its body was too big, so only his head went through the hole. It tried a few more times by withdrawing and rushing into the hole, but it couldn't pass through, so it only fretfully roared. The smaller wolfhound also jumped up and down with saliva dripping from its teeth. However, it didn't have the courage to jump down into the sewer from the ground. Hence, Chang was safe temporarily.

Knowing that the dogs wouldn't be a threat to him, he stood up from the muddy and stinky water. The first impression of this place was dark.

It was literally pitch black.

The visibility of the outside world was low due to the red fog, and the world down here was even darker since there wasn't any form of light. Even though Chang's vision was better than others, he still couldn't see anything in the sewer.

The only light source of this place was from the manhole. The circle of light was so thin and weak that it simply couldn't light up the sewer; Chang stood right under the halo and listened to the wolfhound's barking. He carefully tried to feel around to understand the layout of the sewer while hearing the sound of water flow.

Human were vulnerable in the dark, and it induced fear. The first thought that flashed in Chang's mind was those tentacle monsters that lived in the sewer.

Then, he imagined maggots and flies, as well as a variety of parasites. Although these were just his imagination, he also noticed that the wound on his leg was bleeding.

Slowly, his imagination and reality began to merge. He was bleeding and the smell of blood was strong; in a dark sewer like this, the smell could attract those tentacle monsters to him, as if the blood was a blazing beacon of light that gave his directions to the monsters. The result would be obvious. He would be attacked by a tentacle or something and his body would be smashed into pieces of flesh and he would be devoured. The remaining residues of his body would be left here forever and become a home for mutated flies. All those little maggots would digest his body, leaving him as a pool of pus.

Chang shuddered; with all these reasonable possibilities, he started to realize that his imagination was convincing.



# Chapter 35: Fear

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Chang hesitated.

Everyone feared death, but the ways in which people dealt with death were completely different – a lot of people learned to live with the fact that they would be burned to ashes after they died, but no one wanted to be torn into pieces by disgusting tentacles in the stench of the sewage and rot with maggots covering their body.

If this was what Chang would face when he died, he would rather be gnawed to death by the giant dog – at least it sounded like a more decent way to die.

He wanted to get out of the sewer, but facing death wasn't as easy as he thought.

Therefore, he looked up and down for the halo on top of his head and the dark sewer... It was a great dilemma for him.

The fear of death and prospect of choosing how to die was probably the worst feeling anyone would ever have. It was like asking a convict how they wanted to be executed, "Do you want to be shot or beheaded?"

The fear invaded his heart bit by bit; in the darkness, even a slight sound of dripping water could make him become tense; the barking from the manhole made him even dizzy. He didn't even have the courage to go further in the sewer to look for another exit because it was too dark down here. The darkness seemed thick and

dark, tempting him to move closer. As if he was reaching the end of his life, he imagined numerous tentacles lurking on the sides, just waiting to tear him apart without ever being heard from again.

Chang was scared, so he stayed inside the beam of dim light from the manhole, as if it was warming Chang. He began to fade from consciousness as past memories flooded his mind—

He thought of the college entrance exam, recalled his three year high school life and subsequently, his teenage and childhood memories.

Hanging out with friends, staying up late playing video games, reading numerous novels, watching anime and studying occasionally...

The homemade braised pork he ate, the basketball field covered in sweat...

His stable and worry-free life, and the lanterns that he lit up with his childhood friends in Mid-autumn festivals...

His nagging parents, and the smell of his home...

Chang never clearly knew how happy his life had been before this moment – he had been living in heaven! He used to complain so much and gotten bored so easily. He even pitied himself for living such a stable life...

He used to argue with his parents because he didn't want to study, and he even ran away from home and pitied his own life while sitting on the ancient city wall...

“Would what I'm currently experiencing be different if I studied harder?” Chang curled up under the light and started sobbing.

He always thought that he was the kind of person with a strong mind. Even in the apocalypse, he was stronger than most of the people he had met. But in darkness, he still felt the urge to cry when he thought of his parents and the life that he had before.

He started losing sense of time in his sorrow...

It was a chaotic moment for Chang, but it was broken by sudden erratic barking from above, followed by a few gunshots.

“Chang!”

“Chang!!”

After the gunfire, Chang heard two familiar voices. He sprang up after he recollected himself and carefully stared at the circular halo to confirm that it wasn't his hallucination.

“Am I saved?”

“Chang!!” The same shouting came from above, and he knew

who it belonged to – Jing.

There was no longer any barking and there were people he knew at the other end of the light.

Jing's voice gave him hope, so he immediately refocused himself. He grabbed onto and climbed the iron staircase as fast as he could as he climbed from the darkness to the light of hope.

Step by step...

“I'm here!!!” Chang was unable to hold himself back despite not fully climbing out of the sewer.

Someone followed the voice of Chang and they parted the grass in front of him – it was Jing, Pangzi and Qing Shui.

He was familiar with everyone he saw here.

“I didn't die!! Hahaha, I didn't die in the sewer!” Chang jumped out of the sewer and picked up Jing, giving her a big hug. His voice was loud and clear, “I can't believe that I didn't die down there!!”

“You survived!” Chang's joy rubbed onto Jing, and the trace of anxiety on her face turned into joy as she laughed cheerfully and innocently. Her happiness made the long scar on her face less noticeable.

“It’s great that you’re still alive, bro.” Pangzi patted Chang’s shoulder heavily and he glanced at Chang’s face. Noticing his red eyes, he asked, “Did you cry?”

“No way... why would you think that I cried??” Chang laughed. “It was the stench coming from the sewer; it made me tear up.”

“You climbed out of the sewer?” Qing Shui stood to the side. He took out of some pills and a bottle of rubbing alcohol, but he was puzzled, “You’re such a bad ass... to be able to slide into the sewer while fighting the beast, I thought you were dead already. To be honest, you should have...”

“Should have?” Chang took the rubbing alcohol and sprayed it on his wounds.

“You should have died!” Qing Shui’s word shook Chang’s hand, and he dropped the bottle. “What do you mean by that? You wanted me to die??”

“That’s not what I meant! I went back to the base first and came back for you immediately. It has been an hour since I left, and you were bleeding all over in the sewer. In fact, you should have been dead because of how long it has been and where you were.” Qing Shui pinched his chin. “These factors could have caused a serious and fatal infection; it doesn’t make sense to me.”

“I don’t care about whether it makes sense or not. Maybe I was lucky, but I survived, and that’s all that matters, doesn’t it?” Chang waved merrily, “I’ve never felt so grateful to be alive.”

“I need to find an explanation; I...I need to go down to the sewer and check out what happened,” Qing Shui said.

“Wait... what? Oh please, I just managed to escape from there. You could easily die if you go down.” Chang cleaned his wounds and took an antibiotic pill, and then put the half-full bottle of rubbing alcohol back into Qing Shui’s backpack. “Oh, I totally forgot to ask. How did you drive away the dog?”

“I traded 15 kilograms of dog meat to get the help of six soldiers with guns. Their rifles were powerful and the loud gunfire apparently scared away it.”

“Where are they now?” Chang looked around and didn’t see anyone else.

“They went after that beast; It’s a great target for them anyway. The dog is probably more than three or four hundred kilograms, so if they can catch it, all of the soldiers at the base can have meat for dinner.” Qing Shui glanced in the direction they ran, and added, “Unfortunately, it’s impossible for them to chase the dog. Even if they make it, compared to how strong the dog is, those rifles won’t be able to kill it. It’s a pity since the soldiers may die.”

“Wait, do you think the dog will come back?” Chang wanted to leave this dangerous place as soon as possible.

“I don’t think so, and I know that the soldiers will come back, since they can’t run as fast as the beast. Let’s wait for a few more

minutes.”

While Qing Shui was talking, Chang heard the rustling sound of shoes stepping on the grass. A moment after, six unhappy soldiers carrying their rifles walked out.

# Chapter 36: Roots

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“It ran away.” The soldiers shrugged at Qing Shui.

“Yeah...it’s difficult to catch.” Qing Shui smiled to them.

“Well, I feel like even if it wasn’t running, it would still be hard to deal with.” One of the soldiers that seemed more mature than the others spoke. “It ran too fast and it had a strong body. I doubt our rifle could wound it! The fog was dense too, so we didn’t fire too much in case we got injured.”

“We agree,” the other soldiers nodded. “I could only see within three meters, and to be honest, even if it was standing in front of me, I still wouldn’t be able to see what it looks like clearly since it was huge. We were lucky that we didn’t get ambushed.”

The soldiers started discussing the chase they had, and the sulky look on their face gradually turned into a horrified one.

“I’m glad that we didn’t catch up with it, otherwise we probably wouldn’t be able to come back alive.” The mature soldier made a conclusion and smiled at Qing Shui and Chang. “You guys really have a hang of it, don’t you? The military also sent troops to try to hunt, but we didn’t even see any animals. These domesticated animals seemed to have gone wild after they mutated, and their alertness was far too high to us to even get close to them.”

“Same...it was difficult to look for anything in this fog; we were lucky to even run into one. But see, he almost died for it.” Qing



Shui pointed at Chang, implying that hunting was difficult for them too.

“So he is the guy you wanted to rescue.” They carefully observed Chang, “Fortunately he isn’t seriously injured. The mission is way easier than we thought!”

“Totally, the captain says that each of us will get half a kilogram of meat; for god’s sake, I haven’t had meat in so long...”

“Glug!” A soldier swallowed a mouthful of saliva and said, “it was actually only a few days, but the key is that we haven’t had proper food in days!”

The soldiers became excited when they were talking about the meat they were going to get. Obviously, the food they had these days were also hardtacks and canned food. Although they might have had bigger portions to have energy to fight, they were still starving.

Qing Shui borrowed a flashlight used for night patrols from one of the soldiers and then pulled Chang aside so that those exciting soldiers wouldn’t notice them.

“Will you follow me?” Qing Shui hinted to Chang with his eyes, then turned his head in the direction of the manhole behind the thick fog.

“Are you serious?” Chang frowned. “I just escaped from there,

and I have no clue what is inside the sewer.”

“I want to see what exactly happened down there.”

“Why you are so curious?” Chang furrowed his eyebrows. “This doesn’t sound like something you would do. A rational person like you would normally avoid risks.”

“To be able to predict danger is what a rational person would want to do; I really need to see what happened.”

“Okay, go by yourself then, I’m not coming.” As he just got out from that desperate and dark world, Chang refused to have that experience again – especially since going in again seemed totally meaningless to him.

“That’s fine then, I’m going by myself.” Qing Shui’s voice slowly softened as he carefully climbed down the iron ladder.

“Where is he going?” Seeing Qing Shui disappear into the fog, Pangzi walked to Chang and asked.

“He went down to the sewer. I don’t understand what he was thinking.” Chang shook his head, but he still stared in the direction Qing Shui had disappeared. He waited for about ten minutes, but there was still no sign of Qing Shui. He shook his head again, “I need to go in; I can’t leave him alone.”

“Then I am going with you.” Jing was staying close to Chang

silently, but when she heard Chang speak, she spoke hastily, “I’ll go to wherever you go.”

“No...you aren’t going, stay here.” Chang slightly pushed Jing to Pangzi and said, “Look after her. I’ll go to call Mr. Li out.”

“Trust me.” Pangzi nodded and stopped Jing from following Chang.

Chang followed the darkness from the sewer and cautiously climbed down. The moment he reached the ground, his eyes were shrouded in darkness.

It was still as dark as he remembered; hence, that bright beam of light from Qing Shui’s flashlight was sharp and clear. This first thing he saw were roots from some kind of plant that had entirely covered the wall.

However, reentering this fearful underworld almost broke his nerves. Chang was too anxious and scared to look at the roots. His hands still grabbed at the iron ladder as he shouted, “Mr.Li, you should come back!”

“There’s no danger here.” Qing Shui smiled at Chang, but the smile was twisted by the light of the flash; it horrified Chang. “Come here, it’s peculiar and beautiful.”

“I don’t think that is peculiar, it’s merely some roots.” Chang stayed close to the ladder.

“No, you’re wrong. This is a splendid and magnificent underground world!” As he said that, the beam of light swung across the wall of the sewer as Qing Shui moved his arm slightly.

From just a glance, Chang was impressed by how splendid and flourishing it was!

The walls on both side of the sewer were covered with vines and roots; some closely grew on the wall, some crossed the canal, and some dug through the floor and continued further downwards. It seemed like these massive vines and roots had occupied the underground world of the whole city. From where the light could reach to where they could see, it was all covered with these prospering and strong branches of vines. This peculiar scene astonished him, making him speechless. There was only one thing he could think of from the ancient myths – the world tree.

“What...what is this?” After his initial shock, Chang hunkered down and gently touched a root than was few times thicker than his waist and asked, “What kind of tree does it belong to?”

“I have no idea, it came from far away.” Qing Shui knocked Chang’s hand off of the root as he continued. “Don’t touch them. Their juice is acidic and your hand might be corroded. In fact, I think these roots can act aggressively and attack, but they are currently dormant.”

Qing Shui hadn’t finished speaking before Chang saw a few thinner roots that were wiggling in the light. It looked like a

sleeping person's weak breath – it didn't resemble a normal motionless plant.

“No wonder why I didn't see any tentacles; I bet they were absorbed by this plant.” Looking at the wiggling roots, Chang suddenly imagined how they would sweep forward and roll him up with spikes inserted into his body. He shuddered and said, “Hurry up Mr.Li, we'll be in a lot of trouble if it wakes up.”

“Wait, I need to collect a sample before we go,” Qing Shui said. He ripped off a piece of cloth from his shirt. He took out a knife from his pocket and carefully sliced off a short piece of root. As Qing Shui made the cut, Chang started to tremble with fear and shouted, “What are you doing?”

## Chapter 37: Meat And Weapons

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“Don’t worry, it’s gigantic. Cutting off such a small piece is just like pulling a single hair off of a person; it won’t feel anything.” Qing Shui quickly put the small section onto the cloth and under the flashlight, both of them witnessed how the small piece of root struggled as if it was a tail that got cut off from a gecko. It splashed corrosive mucus from the cut and burned off a big portion of the cloth.

“Such an amazing plant...” Carefully observing every movement of the root, Qing Shui looked at it as if he was holding treasure.

“Alright, we should really hurry up. I feel like you’re getting crazier.” Chang pulled Qing Shui towards the iron ladder. “Let’s get out of here, the tree might wake up any moment.”

Qing Shui didn’t refute him this time. He carefully wrapped the small piece of root and put away his knife, then climbed up the iron ladder.

“Crazy.” Chang sighed as he followed Qing Shui. They returned to the world shrouded with red fog.

“Let’s go back to the base.” After they came out, Pangzi and Jing were relieved. Their faces showed a hint of relaxation. They also found those soldiers sitting on the ground ripping the plants.

“Those plants aren’t edible.” Qing Shui patted their shoulders, “You’ll have diarrhea that might even pull your bowels out.”

“Oh...” They threw away the bok choy-like plants suspiciously, with voices filled of pity. “Let’s go back then.”

“Great,” Chang nodded first. He didn’t want to stay here a second longer.

The group travelled back to the base without speaking. Chang, Qing Shui, Pangzi and Jing were led to an office under the guidance of those soldiers – someone that looked like a captain stood in the room, apparently having waited for them this whole time. Chang and Qing Shui looked up and down at the soldier, and Chang realized he had seen him before – he was the person who handled the argument between Chang and his roommate.

“Captain.” Chang had a good impression of him and hence, he greeted him first.

The captain’s mind went blank for a second; obviously, he also remembered this young man.

“Good to see you again. Have a seat.” The captain pointed to the chairs in front of his desk and said, “The main reason I called you here was because I wanted to talk to you about two things. First, I want to thank you for providing your food to the military, and second, I wanted to ask how you managed to get this meat.”

While he spoke, he lifted a parcel from under his desk. “The dog you brought to us weighed 35 kilograms. I have asked my soldiers to leave the inedible parts, so there is about 25 kilograms left. If

you agree, we will take 10 kilograms and you will have 15 kilograms, or we could split it differently.”

“Of course, if you let us know how to hunt efficiently, not only will we not take any of your harvest, but we will also provide you extra hardtacks. What do you think?” The captain looked at Qing Shui and Chang as he gave the two options.

“I wouldn’t say we have experience to share with you. It was just how much attention we paid to our prey’s sense of smell and hearing. It was something you can find in a book; I don’t have anything to say.” Noticing the captain looking at him, Qing Shui added, “the rest was pure luck.”

“Really?” The captain looked across the four one by one and said, “At least one of you are mutated, am I right?”

“Huh?” They were surprised.

“Don’t give me that expression, I have seen some of them already. Our base has more than 1500 soldiers; it wouldn’t be a surprise that a few of them mutated.” The captain knocked on the table, “Have you ever considered serving the military?”

“We were just lucky.” Qing Shui murmured emotionlessly.

“Okay... you can come to me anytime if you change your mind. Let’s switch topic and talk about how we should divide the meat.”



“We want the 15 kilogram portion!” Chang said loudly.

“No problem.” The captain nodded and pushed the 15 kilograms of meat to Chang. “Be careful when you eat; it might cause riots. I’ll lend you our kitchen to cook and eat, so no one will know you have food. Also, it has been almost two hours since the dog died, and it is starting to smell bad. Don’t save it for a next meal or something, since it’ll rot quickly.”

“We know.” Taking over the chunks of meat, the bloody smell caused contractions in Chang’s stomach. He didn’t leave immediately, and instead asked, “Can I trade some of the meat we have for a gun?”

“A gun?” The captain frowned.

“Yes, a gun that we can use to hunt in the future.” Chang said so while he held the meat, “We won’t be able finish 15 kilograms of meat in one meal even though we’ve been starving for days, and what’s left over will be wasted. I want to trade 5 kilograms of meat for a rifle so that we have a better chance of surviving...”

“I’m sorry, I don’t have permission to do so!” The captain interrupted Chang. While Chang was disappointed and wanted to change his mind to trading meat for hardtacks, the captain spoke again, “I can’t give you a rifle, but if you’re looking for some hunting tools, a crossbow is a better choice.”

The captain glanced at the soldier standing beside him, and the latter left the room as if he received an order from the captain.

A while later, the soldier came back with a dark green crossbow. He carefully put the crossbow on the table – it was coated with a camouflage pattern, making it easily hidden in the grassy bushes. The barrel of the crossbow was as long as an adult's arm and the limbs was twice as long as the barrel. It was made of fine metal; the crossbow was light enough to carry around, but heavy enough to make a stable shot.

“How is this? This crossbow is definitely a better weapon than guns and knives when it comes to hunting. It's flexible and makes almost no sound. In a close or mid-range attack, the arrow can cause more damage than a bullet or a rifle. Although you do need to refill the bow more frequently, it's not like you are using it for a mass killing, so I don't think there is another weapon more suitable for you.” The captain ran his hand over the crossbow and said, “How's this? For 8 kilograms of meat, I'll give you seven large bolts and ten small ones.”

“Deal!” Staring at the green crossbow, hope raised in Chang's eyes – with his vision and this weapon, in addition to Jing's ability and Qing Shui's experience, he believed that the next hunt would be less difficult.

“Good.” The captain ordered his soldier to take away half of Chang's portion of meat, and Chang received the weapon – the military trade was a complete success.

“You can leave if you have no other issues to discuss with me.” The captain impatiently asked them to leave as the meat started smelling worse; he obviously didn't want to waste time either.

“Awesome, thank you.” Chang lifted up the parcel of meat and the four left the room.

“This is my last reminder to you. Be careful when you walk back; a hungry crowd can be terribly aggressive, and riots are like a highly contagious disease.”

## Chapter 38: Aroma

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“Don’t worry, we understand.” Chang and the others nodded and left the office.

“Do you know where the kitchen is?” Chang picked up Jing so that she didn’t need to limp.

“I know.”

“Great.”

“How’s your injury?” Qing Shui asked.

“I’m alright; the wolfhound bit my leg, but it wasn’t deep. It hurts a lot, but it won’t affect my walking and running.” Chang looked at the marks on his leg. “I feel like my wounds heal faster than before; it should be better by tomorrow.”

“That’s good, because we can’t afford to take a break from hunting.” Qing Shui looked at Chang’s crossbow. “Although you’ve got a good weapon and will have a good meal tonight, we will still need at least two meals a day to make sure you have enough strength to hunt. However, since it’s not currently possible to store food, we need to understand the crisis we have on our hands.”

“I know.” Chang nodded as he looked at the red sky feebly and said, “In this world, I’ll never let my guard down.”

“I’m glad then,” Qing Shui replied.

They walked to the kitchen as they talked. Chang found the kitchen, but it was unexpectedly small, which seemed unnatural considering it was supposed to be able to cook for the whole army. There was only one stove – apparently, it was a private kitchen for captains or commanders.

“We’ve arrived. Pangzi, could you ask Lin to come over? We’ll have dinner here.”

“Alright!” Pangzi ran out as he answered. He was so quick that he didn’t look like someone who’d starved for a few days.

“Haha, look at him, I haven’t seen him so happy in while.” Chang laughed, “Mr. Li, let’s cook.”

Qing Shui smiled back and rolled up his sleeves. He lifted the parcel of meat onto his shoulders and walked into the kitchen.

This was probably the best moment they had since the red fog. Even though Chang didn’t know how to cook as his parents did everything for him, he still had some basic sense of how to put the ingredients together. He put aside his crossbow and helped Qing Shui slice the meat. Then, they marinated the meat in a big bowl with salt.

“See, I told you we’ll have meat for dinner today.” Jing was

standing beside Chang and her eyes clearly showed her hunger. Chang picked up a piece of meat as if he was showing off his achievement.

“Thank you!” Jing looked at the pile of meat on the chopping board. She did her best not to drool as she nodded expectantly.

While they were speaking, Lin joined in the festivity and helped boil the soup base.

While Chang was preparing the meat in front of him, he was extremely considerate of every cut he made. He almost got killed by the giant wolfhound, and this was his reward from the deadly chase. Even though it was brutal and inhumane to eat dog meat, who cared when death was looming around the corner?

As they only had limited seasoning, Qing Shui decided to make a stew – not only would they get protein from the meat, but also they could have some soup to warm up their bodies.

An hour later, a big pot of dog stew was placed in front of them.

The five surrounded the pot closely, but they didn’t pick up their bowls and chopsticks immediately as they greedily inhaled the smell of the stew into their lung like this was their last meal.

“I finally understand why people in the past always prayed before they ate food.” Chang picked up a pair of chopsticks and put his palms together. “I feel like I’ve been blessed to have this meal!”

“Yes! Exactly! I give thanks to god’s grace for giving us food today!” Pangzi took out a spoon and scooped a spoonful of the hot stew; he didn’t even care about the heat before swallowing the food. “Hah—” Pangzi sighed, “Thank you god for giving us life!”

“It’s a million times better than the vegetable soup we had yesterday.” Chang also put a spoonful of stew in his mouth. The rich texture and the aroma caught him the moment the spoon touched his mouth. It was so satisfying, and he felt like he was raised up high in the air.

“Thank you god for giving us food.” Chang also showed his appreciation as he took spoonfuls.

“Oh please, don’t mention that vegetable soup here. Lin and I ate some of the vegetables that you didn’t cook yesterday, and it was the most terrible thing I have ever tasted in my life.” As Pangzi complained, he stuffed his mouth with a big chunk of meat.

“I still remember how you resisted eating those plants.... As Mr. Li said, as soon as you are hungry enough, you can put anything in your mouth.” Noticing that Jing didn’t have any food in her bowl, Chang grabbed her a spoon, encouraging her to join in as he smiled. “Jing, there’s no need to hesitate. We were fortunate to have you help us to get all this food, so make yourself comfortable. You can eat as much as you want to, we have three pounds of meat for each of us.”

“If it’s still not enough, I’ll get more for you tomorrow!”

Jing glanced at Chang's face and under his encouragement, she put down her worries and started to eat and drink merrily.

Everyone was immersed in this brief happiness, as if they were living in a dream. They all enjoyed it so much that the room sank in a short period of silence – only the sound of swallowing could be heard, until they almost finished their dinner...

“Chang, we should practice using the crossbow when we finish dinner.” Qing Shui was the first to break the peaceful atmosphere. He put down his empty bowl and turned to Chang. “Practice makes perfection; I didn't know much about crossbow either, but we can try to use it a few more times before we actually go out. Also, the crossbow is too shiny, we should cover it with some mud so it's less noticeable.”

“Alright.” Chang nodded and put the last piece of meat in his mouth.

Time glided by unnoticeably.

The entirety of the big pot of stew, including the bones that could be chewed up had gone down their stomachs. They left the empty kitchen in satisfaction – The other three went back to the dorm room, while Chang and Qing Shui went to a deserted corner of the base to figure out how to use the crossbow.

Standing in the grassy jungle, Qing Shui's figure blurred in the red fog. Chang refocused on his crossbow – they discussed its



structure. Like most weapons in the world, its structure wasn't too different from the bows he used to see on TV: a curvy body with a metal wire connected on its two ends, and a rectangle structure placed below, with a horizontal tray at the end. Chang carefully counted the number of bolts in the tray – there were 17 in total. The horizontal tray made picking up bolts while shooting easier and faster, and it also prevented the archer from accidentally being stabbed by the bolt.

On the side of the crossbow there was a small handle to pull the string. Chang tried to put the handle in place so that the crossbow was ready to shoot, but it required quite an effort, and anyone that hadn't trained for this wouldn't even be able to bend the bow.

Chang kept finding a way to make the process easier. He pulled the handle so that the string was put in place tightly, and then he pulled out a long bolt from the tray and set it in place. Chang carefully aimed at a tree a few meters away, and without hesitation he pulled the trigger.

# Chapter 39: Betrayal

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Whoosh!

The bolt was ejected from the crossbow violently, creating a small gust in the air. In a flash, the head of the bolt was buried deep in the tree trunk.

Chang was astonished by the result; he hastily ran up to the tree to check the bolt – it was 40 centimeters long, but more than thirty centimeters penetrated the tree, leaving only the tail of the bolt sticking out. He grabbed on the end of the bolt to try to pull it out, but it stayed put in the tree without even budging an inch. Chang tried another dozen times before the bolt was finally removed from the trunk bit by bit.

“This is more powerful than I thought!” Staring at the deep hole as well as the juice dripping from it, his voice was full of hope. “This is even more powerful than the pistol I got. The captain was right; a crossbow is definitely a better choice for attacking at short distances.”

“However, the trajectory isn’t as precise as I wanted to be...” Upon checking the hole, he found that the position of the hole was lower than where he aimed – this meant that the trajectory was curved. Since the crossbow was already much heavier than guns, it was harder to aim. Also, the weight of the bolt also altered the trajectory. If it was to be used in close combat, it could cause more harm than a gun, without a doubt. However, if the bolt needed to fly more than 50 meters, the effect would be significantly reduced.

Fortunately, in the shrouded fog, even Chang himself could barely see beyond 8 meters. Therefore, anything beyond 50 meters was out of his consideration.

The most important thing he needed to do now was to test out the properties of the bolts and to operate the crossbow fluently. Before sunset, he made countless holes on the same tree. Of course, if the tree was mutated and acted aggressively, Chang would have been easily torn apart before he even dared to make a second hole.

It was a pity that the evolutionary pace of this tree was much slower than the one he previously encountered – it didn't turn into a horrifying monster and remained a stout tree.

The whole afternoon practice helped Chang learn how to wind the crossbow as fast as he could, as well as distinguish the functions of long and short bolts. He could now make a relatively accurate shot within 10 meters; everything seemed too smooth to believe.

The sky gradually became darker and Chang could see less and less in the dense red fog. When Chang could no longer see beyond three meters, he packed up the crossbow and took all the bolts back from the tree. Walking in the world of red and black, the fog slowly flew by his body, and he felt like a rat in a soup pot.

As Chang approached his dorm room on the first floor, his sensitive nose noticed a hint of a familiar reek from the room. Then, his heart sunk – this stench meant that there was a corpse in his room, and a corpse meant that someone had died. What was worse was that a person died in his room.

Chang already had an idea of who had died.

As he pushed open the door, he saw a corpse covered with a bed sheet lying on the bed of the family of three. The sheet covered most of her body and only her head was exposed in the air. Beside the body was another old man lying on a bed, but his breathing wasn't any better than the lifeless body; he was truly at the gates of death.

The person guarding the bed was their daughter. She never spoke anything when living in this dorm room, and at this moment, she straddled on the edge of the bed like a puppet, emotionless and tearless. No one could tell whether she was sad or not from her face. She just occasionally wiped off the sweat from her father's forehead.

Even though she hid the sadness in her face, her behavior sold her emotions.

"..." Chang sighed heavily before walking into the room, and the corpse exuded an intense reeking stench as he expected. He walked passed the family and sat on his own bed. A surge of compassion and sadness raised from the bottom of his heart.

Last night, Chang was still hesitating whether or not he should give his bed to one of her parents, but today the girl's mother had passed away. He wasn't sad about her death, but his own actions – if he showed his kindness last night, even though it wouldn't prevent their deaths, it could still provide warmth at the end of

their lives.

However, if he let one of her parents sleep on his bed, he would have had a restless night. Would he have been able to escape from the attacks of the giant dog? Would he still be able to sit on his bed right now?

While Chang was struggling, a hand patted on his shoulder.

It was Qing Shui.

“Come with me,” Qing Shui said. He took out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and took two from the pack, handing one to Chang.

Staring at the cigarette, Chang noticed that even the dried tobacco had molded slightly in this terrible world; the white cigarette paper had turned green and yellow, causing him to recall the old man lying on the bed.

“Come on.”

“Okay.”

They didn't talk much; each holding a cigarette, they walked away from the depressing atmosphere.

They leaned on the wall in the hallway. Chang lit his cigarette and said, “Do you know when was the last time I ever lit a

cigarette?”

“I don’t know.”

“It was when I found out that Tao was dead.” Chang touched the finger bone necklace on his chest and said, “On the first day of the red fog, Tao asked me for a cigarette, but I didn’t have any. We went out together to look for antibiotics, but then.... then we took the pills together. I survived, but he died. When I woke up beside his body, I lit one for him.”

Chang inhaled the smoke deeply.

“Are you sad when you saw one of her parent dead?” Qing Shui didn’t comment on Chang’s story, but instead glanced at him and asked something else.

“A little bit, but I wouldn’t say I was sad...” Chang thought again and said, “It was more like compassion; after all, I don’t know them at all.”

“Compassion...that’s a good term. But this is exactly what I want to talk to you about.” Qing Shui said, “I just want to let you know that you shouldn’t be sentimental and show too much sympathy. It will demotivate you.”

“Why?” Chang was confused.

“Because sympathizing for the weak, in essence is betraying

nature.” After a brief moment of silent, Qing Shui’s words made Chang speechless.

Qing Shui then added more as he felt like his statement wasn’t strong enough “What kind of world do you think we are living in? It’s no longer a society of order and discipline, and you should know this. It’s all about natural selection now; the fit will survive. The decision you made last night was absolutely right, so don’t let this kind of incident affect your judgment. Next time, you shouldn’t be affected by sympathy or compassion and make a wrong decision! After all, we can’t stop those who are doomed to be eliminated by nature. I don’t want you to end like that.”

“...”

Qing Shui’s words made Chang lost in thought.

“Thank you...” Shortly after, Chang nodded his head and gave Qing Shui a bitter smile. “But if I don’t even have sympathy and compassion, isn’t that a betrayal of humanity?”

“Don’t think too much about humanity; it’s just a philosophical concept. As long as you live on, you aren’t betraying yourself, your family, Pangzi, Jing and me. More importantly, you won’t betray your own life.”

As Qing Shui finished his speech, he threw the cigarette butt on the ground and stepped on it. He left Chang in the hallway and entered the dorm room.

# Chapter 40: Deadly evolution

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This was the first time Chang saw Qing Shui show such strong emotions and speak in such a forceful tone. The Qing Shui he knew was exactly like the meaning of his name – calm as still water. Expressing such emotions, Chang felt that those words weren't only for him, but also to numb Qing Shui himself.

“It seems like he's also feeling the pressure of his morality.” Chang sighed and threw away the cigarette butt.

He opened the door slowly and walked to his own bed. The door was opened again – it was two soldiers and the mother of the family of four.

When the woman showed up with two soldiers behind her, she started yelling, “See, I told you someone died in our dorm. It's been more than 2 hours and she still hasn't decided to bury her mother. How can she do that? I can bear the stench, but what if it spreads a disease? Who else would be willing to live in here?”

Chang glanced between the woman and the daughter; her body showed a sign of shock and eventually she started talking.

“I just want to stay with my mom longer.” She said as she looked at the bloated corpse again.

“Miss.” One of the soldiers frowned, “We completely understand why you want to accompany your mother, but right now the situation is urgent; please hand over the body to us. As you know, a



large epidemic is usually followed by a disaster, and leaving the body here can easily spread the plague.”

“We also received a command from our captain – dead bodies are to be forcibly cremated. I hope you understand the policy and cooperate with us.” As they said, they stood there quietly to wait for the daughter’s reaction.

However, the soldiers waited more than two minutes and the daughter still didn’t move an inch, so one of the soldiers helped her up and the other came up and dragged her mother’s body away.

Oddly, the daughter didn’t struggle at all, but she began to sob. She didn’t cry loudly; streams of tears ran down her shallow eyes.

The other soldier didn’t look at her too much, nor did he speak. He wore two layers of rubber gloves and grabbed on the body’s ankle, pulling the body to the edge of the bed. He did it professionally – apparently, he had handle quite a lot of corpses these days.

But just as he was going to lift the body into the body bag, the old man on the bed suddenly moved.

He started to tremble and turned his face to the soldier who was going to carry away his wife’s body. The old man stared at her body and shed tears. After he stared at the body for a while, he opened his mouth widely, and a loud “Ahhhh—” sound came from his throat.

Hearing this heartbreaking mourning, Chang knew that the old man was dying too. This was his last breath, and it quieted down as he approached death.

Sure enough, the old man uttered a burp-like sound as his last syllable. Then, he lost all signs of life.

The soldiers were stunned by his death for a good minute. The one who was holding the daughter went up to the bed to examine his pupils and pulse. A moment after, he shook his head to the young woman, and then helped his partner lift up the body to the body bag.

“So this is what the apocalypse looks like...” The scene reminded Chang of his father; he was afraid to look at the daughter’s face. He dropped onto his bed, and clutching his father’s finger bone, he let his mind wander as far as it could.

He was afraid to look at the young woman’s face because he felt that it could be him in the future – as he got to know more about this world, he clearly knew that the chance that his parents were still alive was extremely low. However, he didn’t want to believe it, so he didn’t look at her face.

Unfortunately, humans have exceptional imagination, the more he repressed his thoughts, the more likely those thoughts would appear in his mind; they harassed his mind in the most uncomfortable way. From the death of this old couple, he thought of the death of his own parents. From the word “death”, he

thought of corpses, and then zombies, the walking dead.

He used to read a lot of zombie fiction in the past, and he sometimes wondered why people would be scared by such creatures. In this cruel moment, he understood the reality that he never wanted to face – the reason why humans feared zombie more than tigers was probably due to the fear of seeing how they would look after they die.

Carrying these chaotic thoughts, Chang didn't know when and how he fell asleep. A day full of danger and complicated emotions had passed in this way.

Today, he starved... he wondered... he almost died and cried, but he also laughed and ate until he was full... it seemed like the emotions he experienced in one day in the apocalypse was more than what he ever felt in the past ten years. Chang never knew that all these strong emotions could burst out altogether when he witnessed death. He felt that these feelings would continue to linger on for many days.

During the next few days, Chang went out for hunting in the daytime and when he came back, he always saw bodies being thrown into a large temporary cremation furnace in the courtyard. Within a few days, more than half of the humans in this base had died – hunger and disease finally struck this area coldheartedly.

The first two days, the elderly and the children were the first group to die; the former was weak from aging and the latter was weak due to undeveloped immune systems. Their bodies were thrown into the flames and turned into ashes accompanied with

the cries of their loved ones.

And in the following three or four days, the grim reaper's scythe visited adults and adolescents. Those who were not strong enough also died at this time. For survivors in this game with death, they gradually adapted to the environment, and some of the lucky ones even acquired abilities. Firstly, their digestive systems improved significantly so that they could eat plants that were not normally edible before, including those with slight toxins, hard stems and nutrients that were not easily absorbed.

Therefore, even though the survivors were still struggling to get food and were starving, they already had a better chance of survival compared to a week before.

Naturally, their immune systems also evolved along with their digestive systems, and the survivors barely got sick anymore and became more accustomed to the environment.

Everyone had evolved to different degrees, some people's bones were thicker, while other's muscles were firmer. As mentioned before, a very small amount of people acquired special abilities.

In the week of the "deadly evolution", Chang's body also showed improvements. He became more robust and his special abilities in perception slightly improved as well. As he planned, he went out hunting everyday, but he only succeeded twice. He had caught a water snake and a chicken – indeed, it was a chicken which used to live in a chicken farm, but now it was half the size of a human adult.

Chang came to the kitchen with the poor chicken in his hand and found the personnel responsible for food in the military – Yixuan Mao.

# Chapter 41: Encephalon

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Chang knew Yixuan during the “Deadly evolution” period, he was one of the chiefs who were responsible for the captain’s meals, and during this special period, he became one of the leaders of the commissariat department.

It was quite a coincidence for Chang to meet Yixuan; when Chang and his friends were cooking the snake in the kitchen a few days ago, Yixuan happened to drop by the kitchen. And because they had different reasons of coming to the kitchen, they only had a quick chat. On the same day, they decided on an agreement of exchanging food – Chang exchanged the excess snake meat for 15 pieces of hardtack.

It was a beneficial trade for both sides; Chang wanted storable food and Yixuan wanted protein. It was also a win-win exchange, although 15 pieces of hardtack weren’t usually worth the amount of snake meat that he offered to Yixuan. Chang completely understood the reason behind such depreciation – the snake meat would become inedible in two hours; it was instead a fortune for them to find someone willing to take the meat in time.

Yixuan was a kind man.

Therefore, Chang took the initiation to find Yixuan after the first exchange.

“Hey buddy, see what I got this time?” Chang walked into the kitchen and deliberately made a big smile to attempt to raise the

value of his prey. “Chicken! I got a chicken! How long has it been since you had chicken? Unlike the snake, this is something we usually had before the red fog, can we exchange this for more hardtack?”

“Chicken? Great! Great!” Yixuan kept looking at the chicken in Chang’s hand, his eyes couldn’t move away from the blood dripping chicken and he praised “You are really an expert, you succeeded twice in one week! The soldiers in my troop can’t even achieve that.”

“Pure luck. How is our deal? The chicken weighs at least 25 kilograms, I can share 15 kilograms with you but I want 5 kilograms of hardtacks in return” Chang lifted the chicken to the counter and asked.

“5 kilograms? That is a little too much...although the chicken weighs over 25 kilograms, but the edible portion is way below than that. Not to mention the meat is not storable, if you want some dry food, the 2:1 ratio is not fair enough. You have to know there isn’t that many pieces of hardtacks left in the military either.” Yixuan spoke with a soft tone, he was a kind man even when he was bargaining, his attitude seemed exceptionally sincere.

However, Chang wasn’t buying it. He risked his life for this chicken, and this chicken, could keep someone alive —

“Don’t fool me, even though the hardtack is more preservable compared to the chicken, they will still grow mold eventually; it’s better to trade them with me before I regret.” Chang’s brows furrowed and made a face of the stingy businessmen he had seen in

the market. He continued to argue “In the 15 kilograms of chicken I’ll give you, at least more than 12 kilograms are edible. I believe, you do understand that consuming protein will help you regain strength faster than those who had plants and vegetables only. This is how powerful protein is!”

“Besides, don’t tell me bullsh\*t like chicken meat is not preservable; there are more than a thousand soldiers in this base, 15 kilograms is far from enough to feed these people. So telling me how chicken is not storable is total nonsense to me, this deal is beneficial to you in any ways. No bargain!”

“Well, well.” Yixuan looked at the chicken, he grinned. ”Forget about it, I can give you this amount of hardtack only for the sake of chicken. Give me a minute.”

As he was talking, he left the kitchen. And at the same time, Jing with Qing Shui and Pangzi showed up at the door.

“Jing told us that you guys got a chicken today.” Qing Shui ‘s attention was directed to the chicken on the counter “What are you going to do with it?”

“I am trading part of it for hardtack and we’ll eat the rest, just like what we did last time.” Chang answered.

“I see” Qing Shui nodded.

They all knew what was going to happen, so Qing Shui and



Pangzi boiled a big pot of water and quietly waited for that person to come.

About 10 minutes later – Yixuan came back with a small box of hardtacks, he beamed broadly to the people in the kitchen and subsequently took away the pot of hot water. He began to bleed the chicken and remove its feathers.

Once all that was done, he put the chicken on the scale and sliced off the portion they agreed on.

“Oh right, the captains questioned me when I went to pick up the crackers. I answered them truthfully and they seemed to be interested in you guys. They had your files and records; did you trade with them before? So this is not the first or second time you had meat. They asked me to inform you that they sincerely hope that you can join the army, to teach the soldiers the methods of hunting.” Yixuan put the chicken meat in a black plastic bag unhurriedly and continued “They also said, if any one of you had encephalon mutation—funny that they called these people abiliter, they can send you to the province capital. Our base had contacted the central army in the capital in the last two days and they seemed to be interested in those abiliters particularly. They said the central army will provide safe shelter and sufficient food if you are an abiliter.”

Yixuan said so as if it was a routine, he waved to Chang, “These are all they asked me to tell you, but don’t take it too seriously. I know people who had encephalon mutation are extremely rare, and we only have one in our base. So, focus more on improving your efficiency on hunting instead of this irrelevant information.”

Yixuan didn't seem to want to stay in the kitchen any longer. He turned away with the chicken and left them standing thoughtfully.

Encephalon mutation?

Chang searched for the term quietly in his mind and glanced at Jing and Qing Shui. Jing could sense the aura of living organisms in the external world and transform it into an index; Qing Shui had powerful memorization and analyzing abilities. In that sense, they definitely had encephalon mutation.

So...

"We should prepare dinner now, let's forget about what he just said!" Qing Shui interrupted everybody with a high, clear voice "We should celebrate for every meal with meat, the moment is precious and no one could ruin the vibe."

"Yes! Yes" Pangzi laughed "We should be glad that we are still alive, and we are living better than most of the people here. Since the news has nothing to do with us, why bother thinking?"

Pangzi glimpsed at Jing while he was speaking.

And Jing noticed his glance, she murmured to Chang "I don't want to go to anywhere else.", then she tugged at Chang's shirt and kept silent.

Only Lin, she looked at Qing Shui, then she looked at Jing, but she didn't say anything either.

Fortunately, it was just a brief silence, the five became active again when Pangzi shouted "Food is ready!". It seemed the fragrant of meat distracted everyone, Chang smiled and patted on Jing's head. They had a big pot of chicken stew.

After a full meal, Chang looked up at the ceiling, enjoying the aftertaste of the chicken stew. Qing Shui hunkered down to the small box of hardtacks and was checking the packaging of the crackers.

"Indeed, it seems like they won't last for long." Qing Shui threw a pack of hardtack to Chang while he spoke "You have a sensitive nose; tell me, does it smell like mold? Even just a bit."

## Chapter 42: First cycle

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“Sure.” Chang caught the cracker in the air and sniffed it. “It’s not musty but the smell of the cracker has faded. It won’t last for long.”

“It seems like we have no other choices.” Qing Shui looked at the small pile of crackers. “The military has already noticed us and their food reserve will soon run out. The trade of meat and crackers is going to be cut off.”

“But recently I heard someone was trying to grow crops.” Hearing the bad news, Pangzi anxiously joined the conversation “The plants outside of the base are lush and someone suggested to grow grains and wheat. If the plant has adapted to the environment, the food production cycle should be able to be shortened to 10 days!”

“It is not as simple as you think. A lot of plants that were edible before the red fog had evolved. Some of them smell and taste really bad whereas some of them have even become poisonous, how could you guarantee they are still edible by then? You need to understand all these varieties of crops are part of the plant family, they are evolving and mutating as well.” Qing Shui explained unhurriedly, “Even though they are edible by the time of harvest, what about the ten days of waiting? Are we going to eat grass and roots like the other people do in our base?”

“Then what should we do? The meat we get is easily perishable; we could have a ton of meat but it is going to be wasted in the end!” Pangzi almost yelled.

But his words only garnered silence.

“Do you remember the preservation method we were talking about a few days ago?” Chang broke the depressing silence, he glanced at Lin and said “Formalin, we need to preserve t.”

“You mean...” Qing Shui immediately thought of Lin’s suggestion when he was reminded by Chang. “You meant the same formalin that is used to preserve corpses and organs?”

“Exactly, we can dilute the formalin; and even now, the meat should be able to last for two or three days. If the meat is preservable, then our effort is not wasted; the chance of running out of food is much lower.” Chang slightly squinted his eyes and said.

“But where can we find formalin?” Pangzi asked again.

“In the hospital, there is an abundance of it.” Chang couldn’t help thinking of the first time he went to the hospital for medication. “It’s funny just how scary the word hospital sounds to me.”

“This approach is feasible.” Qing Shui stood up from the stool and said “Let’s go back to our room, it’s pretty late now, we can talk as we walk.”

Chang and the others followed him, they cleaned up the kitchen

as they discussed. In a short while, the kitchen returned to what it looked like before they came.

Their dorm room looked wider and more comfortable compared to the day they first stayed there. A lot of people died in the “Deadly evolution” period, the crowded barracks had become spacious again.

The room they had was for eight people originally, but 12 people squeezed into this room in the beginning, leaving 4 of them to sleep on the floor. However, after only 15 days, no one needed to fight for a bed anymore – because the other families had lost half or more than half of their family.

In the family of four, the older brother was torn apart by the mysterious tentacle on the second day and during the “Deadly evolution” period, the father didn’t withstand the invasion of bacterial infection; now it was only the mother and the younger brother.

As for the miserable family of three, the only survivor was the quiet young woman long before the “Deadly evolution” came. And her parent’s death almost made her collapse mentally. She relied on eating roots and barks every day and looked tortured but surprisingly she withstood all the difficulties.

“Humans are tenacious.” Qing Shui lamented.

At the same time, since four the had passed away, the number of beds finally matched the number of people. But Jing was too

scared to sleep by herself, she usually stayed on Chang's bed – there was even one extra bed in this room, however, no one needed that extra bed anymore.

Although disputes and fighting was less seen these days, the tension was not reduced as people passed away, it turned out to be more depressing – death and hunger had made the air heavier. The strange atmosphere made this room lifeless as if it was a morgue. If someone had not been through apocalypse and entered this room by accident, the atmosphere could cause that person chest pain and nausea.

Therefore, when they walked into the room, they remained silent to blend in, so that their mood wouldn't upset others.

The five would do their own thing tacitly once they climbed on their bed, and they would sleep at the same time when darkness enveloped the city completely.

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Another night without speaking and talking.

The next morning, everyone opened their eyes at the same time when the first ray of sunshine lit up the red fog, and immediately they sat up as if they were programmed.

Chang and Jing always went out for hunting and Pangzi and Ling always went after Qing Shui to look for edible plants – these were

the food that would ensure their life when Chang and Jing didn't come back with meat. As well, they were side dishes if they only had hardtack for dinner – somehow these plants were as important as meat.

Therefore, the clear division made the two groups depart for different directions in the gentle sunshine in the early morning. They lived like their ancient ancestors now, struggling for food and survival every day.

“I wish you luck, Chang.” Qing Shui patted Chang on the shoulder and grinned “Get us another chicken!”

“Finger crossed buddy.” Hearing Qing Shui's blessing, Chang laughed spontaneously, he squatted down to let Jing climb on his back and after waving to Qing Shui's group, Chang and Jing disappeared in the red fog completely.

Walking through the lush grass bush, even if he carried Jing, he could still walk steadily with a relatively fast pace – the evolution in that period made him a stronger person physically, and he could see broader and further. Within 15 meters, the world had not been this clear to him.

“Jing, did your perception range expand as well?” Chang asked while he sneaked through the grass with his long crossbow.

“Yes, it is about 130 meters now, but the expanding rate has slowed down gradually.”



“Just as he said; Mr. Li told me the first large-scale human evolution and mutation period had passed, and we don’t know when the next one will come. By the way, what is my danger index now?”

## Chapter 43: Bullfrog

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“Roughly between three and four.” Jing said “The survivors in our base are about 2 now, meaning they are about two times stronger than they used to be. Some individuals have reached 8, their physical conditions are even better than the huge wolfhound that we ran into.”

“I am wondering if those people have special abilities.” Chang said while he casually rubbed the tangy grass paste onto his exposed skin.

“I don’t think so, Mr.Li was talking about this few days ago; he said the correlation between physical strength improvement and acquiring special abilities is almost nonexistent. Some of the people significantly improved their physical strength, but did not acquire special abilities like what I have. For example, me and Mr.Li have special abilities but our physical strength is pretty average.” Jing smiled “You are lucky that not only your physical strength improved but you also acquired a special ability.”

“True, maybe that’s why it was easier for me to get food. Alright, cheer up! Let’s get something new today.” Chang chuckled and stopped the discussion, Jing closed her eyes and started to probe the surroundings.

When Chang entered his hunting mode, his mind was highly concentrated and the sound of his footsteps became unnoticeable. The pores on his skin were closed through involuntary contraction, helping him to hide his scent. The experience these days had allowed him to adapt to rhythm of hunting, and his body

also responded to such adaptation by enhancing the strength of certain muscles.

“The reason why giraffes have long necks is because its ancestors wanted to reach to the leaves on tall trees; individuals with long necks survived in the difficult times and such genes passed onto their offspring.” This was a Lamarckism explanation before Darwin’s evolution theory.

Before the red fog, if a species wanted to change their trait or physical structure, they needed to go through several generations of eliminations before the effect could be shown, it was an extremely slow process. However, the red fog seemed to be a catalyst on evolution. If an individual wanted to reach to the “leaves on a tall tree”, genetically, the barrier of evolution was broken. An individual was able to evolve on its own. In this era, the speed of evolution was incredibly and unbelievably fast – this was truly a splendid era for living organisms on this planet.

Chang sneaked between the gaps of the grass bush almost soundlessly; he was like a ghost hunter wandering in for food and prey.

The time in the morning had passed before they realized; there were 7 times they almost initiated the hunt but the prey was either too powerful for them or it was a large group of gregarious insects, they were not ideal for them—until the last time.

“Chang, there is a level 5 lone animal, about 110 meters to our 2 o’clock.”

“5?” Chang stopped searching, “We can give it a try.”

“If you can sneak attack it, we’ll have a chance.” Jing nodded “But you have to be careful, you are not an equal match for it if you directly confront with it.”

“Don’t worry.” The two had been hunting together for more than a week, Jing learned how cautious Chang was, she no longer discouraged him very often like she used to do.

Upon detecting this living organism, her job was done, she jumped off from Chang’s back and hid herself in the lush grass – in terms of lurking and fighting, she was not helpful at all.

Therefore, Jing would ensure her own safety before Chang left for the prey – not getting into trouble was the most helpful thing she could do for Chang in this stage.

Jing curled up in the grass and wrapped her tiny body with two pieces of giant leaves, she slowed down her breath and watched Chang remove his shoes before he slowly moved forward.

From downwind, Chang lurked as a cat, his bare feet making no sounds while he moved, he leaned forward to ensure the direction of the wind was correct and he entered his hunting zone.

While he marched forward, he locked a bolt into his crossbow, and adjusted his position so that he was at the downwind direction

all the way to the front of the prey. Without Jing, he took a while to find the organism that she was talking about, after a few hundred meters of finding and keeping up with the wind direction; he crouched in the grass and finally, saw the prey he had been looking for – a bullfrog.

Yes, a bullfrog.

It was not a normal bullfrog in his understanding, it was a bullfrog the size of a bull. The skin was grayish green and it had a pair of huge eyes. The bullfrog kept puffing its cheek and blew out the air with a steady rhythm. It looked like a frog he knew but somehow it was different.

Except for its size, there were also rhino-horn-like keratin tissue sprouting from its back. They were distributed evenly as if it was wearing a suit of armour; it appeared to have a strong resistance to external attacks.

“This is going to be thorny...” Chang clenched the crossbow and calculated the chance he could succeed. “I have a weapon and I may be able to make a sneak attack, but its index is one level higher than me. That is to say, if my first attack cannot cause significant harm to it, I will fail the hunt.”

Facing one that was slightly stronger than him, he needed to make sure the first attempt was his best shot, otherwise the bullfrog could swallow him with ease, or even worse, the bullfrog might just jump away before he even tried. Therefore, Chang was more attentive and alert than usual.

He carefully searched for the weak spot on the bullfrog but there weren't any obvious ones – the keratin tissue covered its whole body, and the thickness of the tissue made it hard to penetrate even if he had a crossbow.

It seemed like only the mandible and the eyes were the spots where a bolt could cause useful harm. Chang stared at its watery eyes and he made up his mind.

“Should I try shooting bolt into it eye? It could be a fatal attack!” Chang moved forward with light footsteps while he was thinking “Its static vision is not as perfect as dynamic vision, and frogs can't smell; if I approach it slow enough, it won't notice me.”

Step by step, Chang was confident about his plan, he spent quite a while aiming at its eye. After double checking, he pulled the trigger. The long bolt turned into a black shadow, flying through the fog and going straight to that moist and bright spot.

Whoosh!

The bolt was so fast that Chang' dynamic vision only captured a touch of black light, and the red fog merged together again.

And because the bolt was so fast, within a blink of an eye, it flew right to the giant frog eye. While Chang was delighted by his accurate aiming, the giant frog opened its mouth suddenly and the tongue popped out swiftly, it precisely slapped on the black shadow.

Chang was petrified.

He didn't know how fast the bolt was, nor the speed of its tongue. The one thing he could conclude was that the scarlet tongue had successfully intercepted the flying bolt; although the bolt was powerful enough for the tongue to knock it, the direction of the bolt was changed.

Puff!

The tilted bolt made a deep slice on the giant frog's tongue and then deeply stuck into the keratin tissue on its forehead, causing the bullfrog to croak painfully.

## Chapter 44: Burn

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Seeing this, Chang loaded another bolt, preparing his next attack. He didn't run away after the first attack because the scarlet tongue had showed him how good the bullfrog's dynamic vision was – it could even intercept the flying bolt. No matter how fast he could run away, he couldn't escape anyways.

Plus, from what he had known, frogs had good dynamic vision but not static vision. So Chang was quietly and calmly changing the bolt.

But he was wrong.

His information was outdated. That frogs had poor static vision was an old notion, they evolved a lot after the red fog.

Therefore, just when he was pulling the string, a scarlet tongue swept towards him from outside the grass bush in just a blink of an eye.

Chang didn't have time to dodge at all, the horrifying long tongue wrapped around his waist and he felt an enormous force coming from it, pulling him upward. Chang was 60 kilograms but instantly, he was caged in its tongue as if he was a mosquito. While the tongue was retracting, Chang made efforts to maintain balance of his body, and while he was nearing the big bloody mouth, he was silently calculating the rapidly narrowing distance between him and the bullfrog.

3 meters, 2 meters, 1 meter...



Bang!

Finally, Chang hit the edge of its mouth, but he was well prepared for this scenario; He stretched out his body widely so that his limbs could hold the mouth open. It was a tough battle between the biting force of the bullfrog and the power that Chang was using to prevent the bullfrog's mouth from closing up.

A level 5 and a level 4 were not that different in power. Chang was stuck in between its upper and lower jaw. Although he felt the force became stronger, he still managed to keep it open. Suddenly, he noticed some strange mucus on its oral lining.

The mucus was grass-green and exuded a pungent smell; it must be either toxic or extremely corrosive. At the same time, he looked down to the tongue that was still wrapped around his waist, there was mucus secreting from its taste buds too. His t-shirt started producing some smoke after touching the mucus, and a stream of heat came after the smoke on his waist.

“It secrets acid?!” Chang was shocked after he started to feel the pain.

Time waits for no one !

Although Chang was in panic, he didn't lose his pace. He clearly knew that it was impossible for him to escape in this moment, so he chose an alternative – He held up the frog palate with his left hand arduously and aligned the crossbow to the center of its mouth hurriedly.

Whoosh! He pulled the trigger again.

Without the keratin armour, the bolt easily cut through the air and pierced the oral lining. It slowed down after went through the lining but it continued to penetrate to the abdominal cavity as if it was a marmot digging through the ground.

“Pop.” The bolt had been deeply inserted into the bullfrog’s body.

The unexpected injury caused the green acidic mucus to be ejected from its mouth by reflex. The acidic streams were so forceful that it splashed onto Chang’s body like a storm. His t-shirt started to burn off first, and the extremely hot sensation became more apparent on the front of his body. Even though Chang was strong-minded, he could not bear it and started twitching up.

The acidic burning almost burned off his skin but not his mind. Under the pain, Chang threw away his crossbow and took out the scalpel from the pocket of his pants. He used his greatest strength to slice apart that scarlet tongue.

The scalpel cut down half of that thin tongue and when the tongue tendon fractured, it sounded like a violin string was cut off.

The bullfrog instinctively retracted the tongue from the pain, and Chang also fell back onto the ground from its mouth.

Stepping on the ground solidly, Chang didn't step back at all but continued to clench the scalpel. And then he advanced, rushing to the front of the bullfrog and stabbing into the delicate skin on its mandible; A vertical cut was created when he jumped up high, the cut was about half meter long and its blood poured down from the top of Chang's head. He immediately withdrew and picked up the crossbow that he just threw away. He now calmly loaded a bolt in few meters away while looking at the bullfrog struggle vigorously.

Whoosh!

The third bolt hit its target – it was completely lodged into the frog's watery eye.

After this shot, Chang was sure that the bullfrog had lost its ability of escaping. There were two bolt in its abdominal cavity and eye respectively and the one in the stomach had make a deep penetration. Other than that, the cut on its mandible was fatal since it sliced open its throat. It would be dead even though it had such a strong vitality.

Everything fell within his predictions. The frog convulsed for a few times and tried to jump away from Chang, but the last jump was also its last dance step; it spun in the air then fell back on its back. The blood kept oozing out from the mandible and it was twitching involuntarily. It was dying.

After seeing his prey became lifeless, Chang loosed his taut nerves completely, and the pain that had been repressed, came back to him violently—his attention was directed away when he was battling with the bullfrog, but he was relaxed now. The

extreme sensation flooded his body and mind. Chang quickly took off his shirt and checked his burn marks.

Looking down, he found his entire upper body up to his nose had been burned, blisters in all sizes were spread on top of the burn mark, his body had turned red and was rapidly darkening. The intense burning pain came from his whole upper body, making him scream hopelessly.

“Ah——!” His scream was shrill; the corrosive burn was one of the most painful forms of injury. He felt like someone had lit up fire on his body, and subconsciously he scratched his body, hoping that can reduce the suffering. But instead, the scratching resulted in quite an amount of charred skin falling off.

“Chang!” Jing’s voice came from 10 meters away, she detected that level 5 organism was weakening constantly and Chang’s index had been fluctuating up and down. She had inferred the result of this battle.

Parting the grass, she finally found them, and then she saw a charred and scarlet Chang.

“Ah!!!” Acid burns were not fatal at the beginning, but the complication came after made some terrifying marks. Some mucus remnants kept making more blisters.

“Chang, what happened?” Jing cried anxiously after she saw he was suffering. “What, what made this?”

“Don’t touch me, the mucus is corrosive, get me some water... quickly.” Chang didn’t wait for Jing to reach to her water bottle, he hastily snatched the water bottle from her waist, which was their water supply for the whole day. He impatiently poured the cold water.

The whole bottle of water flew down from his nose, the acid was diluted. The smoking was stopping and the charring was terminated temporarily. He started to breath deeply lying on the ground.

“Chang, are you all right?” Nervously looking at Chang breathing with difficulty, Jing cried out loudly “Answer me, are you okay?”

“I.....I am...fine.” Chang lied on the ground, the subsequent complication of burns caused his muscle spasm up unnaturally, but he words sneaked through his clenching teeth. “I....I feel like...I ... can’t ... stand up. Go.....go back, tell Mr.Li.... tell him....I got..... burn....”

“And.....there are.....tons....of.... meat...” His voice became quieter.

# Chapter 45: Fret

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“Wait for me here, I am going!” Jing nervously looked at Chang wheezing, she didn’t want to waste even a second; she wiped away her tears and ran south hastily.

And Chang continued to stay on the ground feeling the pain.

After Jing left, his body calmed from the state of convulsing in a few minutes. His breathing was still rapid, the blood taste in his throat didn’t go away at all and his breathing began to smell bad as well.

He took a quick glance at the dead bullfrog and murmured to himself sarcastically “This is the third time I have asked him to come save me these days.”

The first time was in the sewer, where he lived through the fear of uncertainty and death. And this time he became immobile and his skin was burnt off. In total, he succeeded four times and was endangered twice, this was how risky hunting was.

Although the acid burn made it difficult to breathe, he was actually feeling much better than the last time – It was such a big frog! And he was safe for now as long as the blood smell hadn’t attracted other predator. Therefore, even if he looked terrible with the crimson and charred skin, at least his mind was calm.

Chang even began to analyze the hunting experience these days.

Needless to say hunting was challenging and meat storing was impossible. Even though he had all these improvements on his body, getting something was still difficult and risky. That's why Chang was thinking to reduce the times of going out for hunting.

And this time the bullfrog was huge enough for them to eat for a while if they had proper preservation methods.

While Chang was planning all these, his breathing slowly calmed down. Although the shortness of breath was still pretty severe, he had recovered from the hypoxic state, letting his mind become clearer.

Upon the partial recovery of his respiratory function and mobility, Chang didn't sit up immediately, the strong sense of weakness still existed. Thinking of this, he simply decided to lie on ground to wait for Qing Shui to come.

The spot was pretty close to the base, Chang believed that they would come soon – and as expected, in 20 minutes, he saw Jing had brought Qing Shui, Pangzi, Lin and the young woman, who lived in the same dorm room and lost her parent not long ago, came together.

With the help of Jing's ability, they easily found Chang in the lush grass bush, and the latter struggled to sit up when he saw his companion came, he then revealed a confused look when he noticed the young woman.

“I didn’t know she is a doctor, I asked her to come for exchange of three packs of hardtacks.” Qing Shui turned to that young woman after he explained “Dr. Huang, please forgive us for not being very helpful on your parent’s death...I hope you can take a look of my friend here.”

“Sure.” She still had the numb expression on her face like she was in the dorm; she nodded calmly and crouched down to Chang to examine his injury – she carefully smelled Chang’s breathing and examined the burn marks on his body. She said to Qing Shui “His obvious symptom is water-electrolyte imbalance, it was caused by the acute kidney failure from the extensive burn.”

“Acute kidney failure? It is a serious disease, isn’t it?” Qing Shui furrowed his brow when he heard the young woman’ diagnose. Although he was not a doctor, he knew the severity of acute kidney failure. It was a lethal disease; it was also difficult to cure. Qing Shui was shocked by the information and had to asked again

“Is it possible that you can treat him?”

“In the medical knowledge I had known, it was simply incurable without the right equipment and related medication,” The young woman was still examining “But I don’t think you need to worry too much, because in theory, the symptom of water-electrolyte imbalance takes at least a few hours to appear even it is caused by acute kidney failure, but he is very special. Due to the evolution on human bodies now, the physiological mechanisms of human body might have changed. Therefore, he won’t die, instead, I feel like his body is healing itself rapidly.”



The young woman spoke as she carefully peeled of a piece of charred skin off of Chang's chest. She observed that piece of skin seriously and said "The self-repair ability of him is strong, and those failing internal organs seems to be getting better overtime. Look at him, his breathing has become more stable compared to the first time I examined him, and the breathing odor is fading as well. These is evidence of improvement of the metabolic functions. So don't worried, if things go well as I predicted, he will recover soon."

"That's good...that's good." When Chang first heard to the diagnosis of acute kidney failure, his heart sunk and didn't dare to say anything to interrupt, until the young woman concluded. He was relieved.

"Fortunately, they are just burn marks that make my appearance looks bad, it is not taking my life." As he was talking, Chang stroked his chin where the acid burns made red scars.

"You should not move before you breathing become smooth again." The young woman pressed down Chang's body so he laid back down and she stopped speaking.

And after Chang felt the sense of security, all the thoughts in his mind refocused onto food. Although he was resting, his mouth didn't stop.

"Mr. Li, did you see the bullfrog?"

"Yes, it is huge and judging by its appearance, it should be edible. Let me double check." Qing Shui's attention also redirected to

somewhere else after confirming Chang's safety. He talked while walking towards the bullfrog. He then took out some dried plant powder to cover the bloodiness.

After doing all these, Qing Shui asked Pangzi to come.

“Do you bring the stuff I asked you to take with you?”

“Here they are, I took all of them after I heard Jing saying there was tons of meat lying here.” Pangzi threw an ax and a long knife on the ground, he also lifted up his t-shirt to take out the woven bags that was tucked between his waist and pants. Pangzi's voice had a sense of pity “There is too much meat and we are going to have to throw away a lot, such a waste...”

“It won't be wasted, because I am going to find formalin.” Qing Shui pointed at the ax and knife on the ground “You and Ling can help dissecting the frog into big pieces, then put those into the woven bags; if there is not enough space then take the legs pieces, they have more muscle on the legs and are easier to cook. Also be careful when you are cutting it, there should be acid secretion glands, just don't touch those spots. Jing and I are going to the hospital to get some formalin.”

“Got it” Pangzi and Lin nodded.

Finishing his words, Qing Shui returned to Chang, and smiled at the young woman “Dr. Huang, my friend is all on you, please.”

“No worries.” The young woman feebly nodded.

“You are going to the hospital for formalin?” Chang sat up from the ground.

“Yes, you can take a break now, I’ll be right back. And of course, in order to avoid dangers, I have to take Jing with me.” Qing Shui looked at Jing, who had been sitting beside Chang the whole time, he grinned at her and squatted in front of her

“Alright, it’s my turn to carry you today.”

Jing looked at Qing Shui, then looked at Chang’s crimson body. She swallowed her saliva and said “Chang, wait for me.”

“I will, be careful.” Chang patted on her shoulder and gazed after their figures disappeared in the fog.

“You still have someone to fret about... I really envy you.” The young woman emotionlessly said.

## Chapter 46: Super Life

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“I am sorry for your lost.” Chang again glanced at the direction where Qing Shui and Jing had gone.

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Qing Shui and Jing were aiming for the general hospital, which was the nearest hospital in this area. If they could find the solution anywhere, it would be there.

Carrying Jing on the back, Qing Shui and Jing didn't talk to each other on the way to the hospital; in almost half an hour, they finally arrived at their destination. It had a huge plaque on the gate of the courtyard, and if they went close enough, they would clear see a few characters in the neon light box “Kaifeng General Hospital”.

“Here we are.” Qing Shui put down Jing, he glimpsed at the extinguished neon light box, and took a quick look over the disused hospital. He asked Jing with confusion “Can you detect any dangerous organisms?”

“Not at all.” Jing shook her head.

“That's strange...” Qing Shui rubbed on his chin and asked again “Are there any humans?”

“There aren't any either.” Jing shook her head again.

“There must be something wrong.” Qing Shui looked around the courtyard and said “There should be groups of people residing in the hospital, given the fact that there is a large inventory of medication. Even if the “Deadly Evolution” reduced the population significantly, it still shouldn’t be as lifeless as now. And there aren’t any traces of mutated organisms, isn’t it weird to you?”

“I have no idea; we just need to be extra careful.” Jing closed her eyes to sense the surroundings again, she took a deep breath and confirmed “There is nothing here.”

“Okay, you never made any mistakes in detection before. Let’s be more cautious and go slower, if there is anything that shows up we’ll turn back immediately.”

“Okay.”

They walked into the courtyard cautiously as they made up their mind. For almost every two steps, Jing would scout around – but still nothing was found.

As Qing Shui’s vision was not different from normal person, he could only see within 3 meters. In his world, the surroundings were bloody red, and except for where he was standing, he was almost completely blind to this world.

Although the fog was a great barrier, walking along on the traces of the gravel pavement had helped them orient themselves. It was hard for them to miss the direction even though their vision was

pretty bad. Therefore, walking on the “nature-made pavement”, it was relatively unimpeded, uncannily quiet and unexpectedly safe. They arrived at the center of the courtyard – it was strangely smooth.

“Hold on.” Qing Shui stopped after they got to the center, “There must be something unusual happening here, I am extremely uncomfortable with this freaking silence. We should go back.”

“We can.” Jing didn’t dispute with him “But what about the formalin?”

“We can go to other hospitals instead of this one, there are quite a few smaller ones nearby.” As Qing Shui said so, he patted on Jing’s head to beckon her to return.

At the same moment that his left foot left the ground, he realized his feet were nailed to the ground; he immediately looked down under panic and found numerous root-like vines sneakily and vigorously wrapping around his ankles, and the fact that they kept twining up to his legs had almost made Qing Shui scream.

Without a second thought, Qing Shui pulled out the knife that he always carried and began to cut the vines. But not even his best tries seemed effective – those pliable and soft looking vines were tough as steel.

In three or four seconds, the crazy vines had wrapped Qing Shui up to his waist and stopped growing. Jing was not exempt from this sneaky attack either.

“What’s wrong?” Qing Shui was obviously flustered and panicked.

“I don’t know; I didn’t detect anything at all.” Jing was even more terrified, and the ineffectiveness of her ability on this plant made her feel frightened.

The strange atmosphere sublimated completely until a voice spoke in the air.

“Hello, human.”

A normal sentence that was usually used by aliens invading Earth, the voice was old as if it was an echo in a tree hole. The language it used was Mandarin, thus the two understood what it was saying.

“Who are you?” Qing Shui looked around nervously, and saw a giant hazy shadow.

The shadow was towering, and Qing Shui couldn’t even estimate how tall and wide it was, he couldn’t even know what it looked like. The reason why he saw the shadow was because it blocked the sunshine on the top of his head, otherwise he wouldn’t know something had approached him.

“Hello human, I am a tree.” The shadow moved like a ghost without any sound. When it stood close enough to Qing Shui and

Jing, it completely blocked the light. It spoke again “If I have to explain in the human language, I am a willow tree, a mutated one.”

“Willow tree?” Qing Shui suddenly thought of those thick and stout roots he had seen a week ago in the sewer; those roots covered the whole underground world and he even thought that was a “World Tree”. This made him even more curious and skeptical about this world. He still remembered he brought a souvenir – a small section of a thin root, it was in his pocket now.

“Yes, I am a willow.” The gigantic shadow spoke again “You have met me before, you still have part of my roots, don’t you?”

The hollow sound continued to echo around Qing Shui and Jing, and then Qing Shui saw a twig extend over in the air in a slow pace. The twig kept reaching until it slid into his pocket, then it rolled out that piece of parched root.

“It used to belong to me.” As the shadow spoke, the twig rolled up tightly and that piece of root was crushed “But I don’t need it anymore.”

“Are you really a tree?” Seeing that twig was as flexible as a human finger and hearing the human-like voice, even though Qing Shui was knowledgeable in biology and got used to seeing all sorts of strange plants and animals, he still could not believe these were facts.

“Yes, I am a willow tree and it is not beneficial for me to lie to you.” The voice in the air sounded patient.



“Then how do you know the human language?” Qing Shui yelled, as if using this hysterical voice could cover this crazy fact, “Even though some pieces gained intelligence through evolution, it is still impossible to learn the human language in such a short period of time! Alright! Let’s just assume you have learned it; it is too hard for me to believe you understand every single word profoundly... The way you speak and your tone was nothing like a beginner!”

“You are like...You are like a living human!”

“Because, in essential, my wisdom is human’s; and naturally, the language I speak is the human language.” While the hazy shadow was explaining, a twig dropped from above, but it was dozens times thicker than the last one and extremely complicated – It was like a precision instrument consisting of a twig combined with numerous thin branches.

In this twig combination, some branches were as thick as an index finger and the thinnest ones were finer than human hair. All of them wrapped around a football size of ellipsoid covered with a thin transparent resin film; within the ellipsoid, there was a human brain.

A fresh human brain, the blood vessels seemed to be delivering blood to parts of the brain as if they were functioning perfectly, and they were also fused with those hair-like red willow branches, which were constantly transporting blood and minerals to the brain.

# Chapter 47: Imagination

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“What...What is this...” Qing Shui was appalled by the contents of the resin ellipsoid. He carefully distinguished the gyri and sulci of the brain, then suddenly, his eyes widely opened, and he seemed to be afraid to believe what he saw.

“This is a human brain” Although Qing Shui had saw it closely, he still refused to accept this fact. The physiological structure of this tree had destroyed his previous knowledge of biology, “The brain, is it still alive?”

“Yes, it is alive, and it functions perfectly. The ability of keeping the brain alive is the ability that I am proudest of since I mutated.” As the Willow said so, it withdrew that sophisticated twig combination into the air, and it body emerged in the fog again.

“Now, I am sure you have understood why I can speak human language.”

“I understand.” Qing Shui nodded. “The real is the rational and the rational is the real.” He murmured to himself and took a few deep breaths, he asked “But how many brains can you control?”

“So far there is not many, only seven.” The Willow said with a tone of pity, “The amount of information in the human brain is massive; not only the capacity had troubled me, but also the complexity. When I was acquiring and controlling the sixth brain, I felt like all the information collided with each other. It produced a lot of conflicts as if they became a twisted twine, it really gave me

a hard time. Therefore, after acquiring the seventh, I decided to stop temporarily so that they won't 'short-circuit'."

"I see, but what is your intention after catching us?" Qing Shui looked up to the towering shadow and asked "As a producer in the food chain, you should not be lacking organic matter; instead, you can absorb as much as you want to from the soil. Therefore, it won't be very useful for you to swallow me. Plus, you had just said roots are useless to you now, that means you had evolved to gain nutrients through other channels. If you really have two channels of gaining organic matters, your body will not lack nutrition."

"And if my body is useless to you, then your goal is my brain. But you just have said, you don't have room for more information. That's why I was asking, what do you want from us?"

"You are smart... and I bet you must be extremely knowledgeable; I wish I could substitute it with you." As the Willow said, it dropped down another fine twig combination, "This brain is totally worthless; it is all about sex, violence and bargaining, I wish I could empty this spot for you. Unfortunately, if I chopped off this branch, I'll lose the spot too."

"So...so I am lucky in this sense." Qing Shui smiled wryly then continued to asked "You haven't told me why you caught us."

"Questions." The old and hollow sound echoed around Qing Shui and Jing again. "I have questions in my mind, and they have to be untied. Although I cannot hold more massive flow of information now, I can still handle one or two questions. Therefore, I just want to ask you a few questions."

“And why should I answer you?”

“If I am satisfied with the answer, I can let go of you guys; but if not, you will exist as my nourishment.” As it talked, another stout twig stretched over; this twig looked ferocious and it was completely different from the sophisticated twig combination from earlier. It was not only thick but also had sharp barbs. The barbs evenly spread around the twig and dozens of dry hollow human skins were hung on it “If you can’t answer my questions, you’ll be one of them.”

“Why should I believe in you?” Qing Shui stared at these hollow human skin desperately.

“Because you have no choice.” The Willow retracted the skin pendants and said “I can find someone else if you don’t want to speak, my life is very long and I am patient. I am not rushing to know the answer, and I think there are plenty of people that know the answer on this planet. You can choose not to believe in me and become my fertilizer immediately, or, you can bet on me. But I can tell you that it is not necessary for me to lie to you.”

“Well .... I have to admit I really don’t have any other choices. And the way you speak is persuasive, I bet one of the seven must came from a lawyer.” Qing Shui was compelled to reply “Tell me, what do you want to know?”

“What is intelligence? This is my question.” The hollow voice had a trace of trembling.

“Humans have defined intelligence in various perspectives; creative ability, curiosity, logical thinking, organizing and categorizing ability, etc. but I think what makes human intelligence unique is imagination.”

“How?”

“If you had learned from the brain you acquired, you should understand many other animals have curiosity, organizing abilities, even logical thinking; these are not something exclusive to human.”

“Indeed, the rats know how to clean and organize their own nest, lions and tigers know where to find their prey, monkeys and apes know they could move wooden box under the banana tree so that they could step on it to reach the bananas. Therefore, these are not making human intelligent unique because the species I have mentioned don’t seem intelligent. So if you are right, the difference between humans and the other species is...”

“Yes, imagination, it is what makes the real difference.” Qing Shui explained “Including reasoning, manufacturing, designing, even literature, opera and civilization. They are products of imagination.”

“I see; I am happy with your answer.” After the Willow dropped down its response, it retreated into a deep silence. It seemed to be trying to understand what was imagination and Qing Shui patiently waited.

Moments after, the Willow spoke again “The second question... How did human obtain imagination?”

“No one has a true answer to this question, but one of the arguments I believe was the fear of natural disasters driving the evolution of imagination today.” Qing Shui spoke slowly “I heard the first generation of humans who gained imagination was through observing the alternation of seasons. During the wet season, humans could produce crops and had a sufficient water supply. However, during the dry season, a large amount of human died due to lack of water. And this went through countless generations of evolution, when one of these generations began to imagine what would happen in the dry season, they would begin to store water and crops with containers they made. And this may be, the first generation of humans who gained the ability of imagination.”

“Imagination of crisis? I see.” The Willow again sunk into silence.

But Qing Shui didn't need to wait for long this time, he suddenly felt the branches around his waist begin to move, and then he looked down, he found the twigs were retracting, from the waist to the legs, and from the legs to the ankle, they eventually withdrew back into the ground completely.

“I am satisfied with your answer; you may leave now.” The Willow said.

“Before I go, can I ask you something?” Knowing that he was free now, Qing Shui’s face was lit up with ecstasy. He didn’t leave immediately but remained at where he was.

“Sure, I am listening.”

“Why? Why you have already acquired human brains but still need to ask me what is intelligence?”

“Because I am not intelligent.”

## Chapter 48: Carrier

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“You are not intelligent? How could that be possible?” Owning seven different human brains and able to handle the conversation with Qing Shui in a wise way, no one would believe that the Willow was not intelligent.

“Nothing is impossible, I am not intelligent myself but am only possessing and utilizing these brains. In fact, the ability of organizing the language I am speaking with you comes from the signals of these brains. Hence, I, as a tree, am not intelligent.”

“But I thought if you can utilize these brains, it means you are intelligent too, aren’t you?” Qing Shui was still confused by the Willow’s words.

“It’s different, I am merely a carrier.” The hollow voice spoke again, “My consciousness was given by these brain; in some sense, I am more of a person who changed its body, but not a tree who grew brains! Because my thoughts and everything are generated by the seven brains, I myself, don’t have the ability of thinking.”

“I can even say this is a cross-species human evolution essentially, because I only possess human brains, but the thoughts and ideas were all produced by them, not me. I am simply a provider of a stronger body and a bond of connecting these brains.”

“I have learned that in science fictions, humans are planning to relocate their brain into an artificial body when the technology



becomes advanced enough to do so, so that human can live longer. Right now, even though I am a willow tree, I am like the artificial machine that humans have been aspiring for. The ability I gained from the mutation was absorption and possession, it was a coincident that I was able to acquire a human brain. But what am I really? I am still a willow tree.”

“It sounds reasonable.” Qing Shui pondered over the Willow’s statement, “But in the end, you are still different from machines as you are constantly evolving; right now you are already aware of your own existence, I dare to say you are only steps away from having your own intelligence. By the time it comes, you are not limited to possessing human brain but will truly exploit their intelligence and make them your own.”

“I am curious about what kind of world will be created by an organism like you that aggregates intelligence of all mankind.”

“You will see that day coming...” The last word of the Willow sounded determined but with hesitation. It chuckled for a few seconds and its figure began to disappear. The shadow on the top of Qing Shui’s head was getting smaller and smaller, and the warmth of the sun sprinkled on Qing Shui again.

“Where are you going?” In the very end, Qing Shui shouted to the vanishing figure.

“To the south. I am biding my time. I’ll come back when I am able to think as an individual.” As the Willow said, the shadow completely became invisible, the world returned to bright red.

Gazing at where the Willow left, Qing Shui didn't make a sound for a very long time.

"Mr. Li, Mr. Li..." Qing Shui did not recover until Jing grabbed on his shirt.

"Mr. Li, let go of the Willow, we still have to find formalin." Jing didn't consider too much about the Willow, her world was simple and she had someone and something more important to think about compared to the existence of the Willow.

"Chang and the others are still waiting for us, if we go back late, that bullfrog will expire and we'll starve again."

"Right...right! You are right." After Qing Shui was interrupted by Jing, he grinned to himself mockingly, he looked down to the ground again "I can't even guarantee my own safety now, why would I think of those problems?" He again glanced at the direction where the Willow disappeared and carried Jing on his back "Let's go for the formalin!"

"Now that the Willow is gone, we can take advantage of its power; it is certain that there are no other dangerous organisms around us now." The courtyard was as peaceful as it had been; they found the chemical storage room, and they didn't run into other dangers as they expected.

In the room, Qing Shui easily found the pungent chemical solution he wanted – formalin.

After confirming the tags on the plastic bucket, Qing Shui picked up two units without hesitation, he also grabbed some small packages of medication just in case. Then the two walked as fast as they could to go back to Chang.

The return was fairly smooth and with Jing's detection, they avoided some dangerous creatures which were circling around the hospital; half an hour later, they found Chang and the others.

"Why you were so slow? The meat almost gone bad." Seeing Qing Shui with the buckets, Pangzi asked anxiously "You didn't encounter any beasts, do you?"

"Yes, in fact, an extremely dangerous one which almost killed me." As Qing Shui spoke, he walked to the front of Chang, and Chang had been able to stand up, apparently he had regained mobility, although he still looked weak and his upper body was still charred and crimson, he seemed to have no serious problem.

"How? I thought nothing should be able to get close to you with Jing's forewarning. Was it something that came from underground?" Chang stepped over to check Qing Shui and Jing in haste, but found out they weren't injured at all.

"We are fine, it is too complicated for me to explain what exactly happened to us right now. I'll tell you when we get back to the base. Now, let's treat the bullfrog first. Pangzi, you guys dissected the frog, didn't you?"

“We did it long before you came back, we even deboned it. See, me and Lin have packed them into the bags.”

‘Great, thank you.’ Qing Shui walked to those big woven bags and opened one bucket of formalin, he evenly sprinkled the chemical solution into every bag with a wisp of grass, he said

“The formalin will slow down the rotting, we’ll find some barrels to dilute the formalin with water after we go back to the base, and then we can put them into the barrels. With this strong preservation, our food can be preserved for three or five days even now.”

“Alright, we are ready to go, the longer we stay, the more dangerous it will be.” Seeing Qing Shui had organized everything, Chang turned to the doctor “Thank you for today, please come with us.”

“I didn’t help much, you don’t need to thank me about this, your body was strong enough to recover itself.” The doctor was still expressionless; she spoke unemotionally “Let’s go.”

“Coming.” Chang nodded as he turned to his friends; Qing Shui, Pangzi and Lin carried one woven bag on their back respectively.

“Do you need help?” Chang walked with Lin.

“I might not be able to carry this before, but don’t worried, I have become stronger than before too.” Lin had a pale smile on her face “You got burned, mind yourself first.”

“Hahaha, good, good.” Chang laughed, he waved his right hand as a sign to ask Jing to follow him, the six walked back together.

As they walked on the gravel pavement, Chang was behind the group to ensure everyone’s safety, he lowered his voice and asked Jing “Jing, can you tell me about the danger you ran into?”

“It was a big willow, a gigantic one! I couldn’t see what it looked like at all, I only knew it was there; it was so big that It blocked the sky! And even when it was right in front of me, I couldn’t sense anything as if it nullified my ability.”

“A willow?” hearing the words made Chang frowned. A hospital, and a willow, he recalled the second day of the red fog, he also had encountered a willow when he went to the hospital for medication; it consumed human blood and flesh, and it hung those hollow human skins on its branches as if they were trophies. The level of that willow was higher than 100 already by that time, and it was only the second day! The strength and the rate of the mutation were horrifyingly fast growing.

In fact, Chang clearly knew that he had rarely met any organisms over level 30 these days. That only implied one thing, even though the rate of evolution and mutation had been escalated, the willow was still one of the kind in terms of the rate of mutation. If the one he met and the one Qing Shui ran away from were both willows, he believed the one that Jing was talking about, was the one he had escaped from.

“If you really ran into it, it was impossible for you to come back alive!” Chang gazed at Qing Shui’s back thoughtfully. Qing Shui was weighted down by the woven bag on the shoulder, his footsteps were heavy.

## Chapter 49: Share

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Observing Qing Shui from the back, this was the first time Chang had ever seen Qing Shui stooped; although Qing Shui had a skinny figure, but he had always been exceedingly shrewd. Chang remembered a quote that he read in a book – “if a person who usually stood upright began to bend his back, it was because he had something heavy either on his shoulders or in his mind.”

The bag wasn't that heavy for Qing Shui, since he had also become stronger after the “Deadly Evolution” period; hence, there was only one cause – the pressure in his mind.

“What does the Willow really look like?” Chang tried hard to uncover the myth – what kind of life could give Qing Shui this amount of unbearable pressure?

“A gigantic tree, it spoke...and it has seven brains...” Jing walked slowly as she recalled the details, and she told everything she saw to Chang.

The expression on Chang's face became more astonished as Jing told the story. Chang seemed to be unable to process their unbelievable experience with the Willow as his mouth opened unconsciously.

Chang was lost in thought like Qing Shui after hearing the whole story. His lips pressed together tightly.

None of them talked afterward, and Chang followed the group to

the base and went straight back to their dorm room.

Qing Shui pushed the door with his left shoulder, causing it to creak open. They entered the room one by one; Qing Shui, Pangzi and Ling put down the weight on their back in a corner of the room before they had a chance to catch their breath.

“Pangzi, put aside the formalin; we still need to go to find some barrels. Time waits for no one and the longer we wait, the harder it will be for us to treat the meat.” Qing Shui wiped off the sweat on his forehead and pulled Pangzi to go out with him.

A moment later, they came back and forth four times in total, and each time they went back, either Qing Shui or Pangzi would carry a big dark green iron barrel filled with water. After four trips, they had the barrels aligned tidily under the window. Then, Qing Shui poured the same amount of formalin into three of the barrels, letting the chemical mix well with the water.

“The formalin I brought from the hospital was 40% formaldehyde. The concentration is way too high for us even now, so I’m diluting it.” Qing Shui explained his intentions while mixing the chemical with Chang’s iron spear.

After Qing Shui did this, he untied the woven bags and carefully placed chunks of frog meat into the formalin solution.

“What are these?!” Noticing Qing Shui unfastening the bags, the mother from the family of four could no longer hold herself back. She stood up from the bed weakly and pointed at Qing Shui’s face,



“That is meat; you have MEAT!!” she shouted.

“Stop yelling for god’s sake.” Pangzi interrupted her immediately as if her shouting had caught the attention of the entire building. This was a special and sensitive period; they couldn’t let other people know that they had food, especially protein! Otherwise, their room would be swarmed with starving people within 5 minutes.

“How is it possible that you have so much meat!” The mother stared at Qing Shui eagerly, and desire was obviously showing on her face. “No wonder none of you died these days, not even that skinny little girl! I see...I see! You have food! You have meat!”

“Shut up, whatever we had and have is none of your business!” Pangzi’s face became ferocious as the woman kept being annoyed.

At the exact same moment, the door opened again. It was the younger son, whose older brother was torn by the tentacle, that walked into the room. His appearance intensified the atmosphere; he only had a small trunk of root in his hand – without a doubt, that was their only food today.

“What’s wrong, mom?” the son was alerted as he saw Pangzi confronting his mother.

“Meat?” the son turned his head and sure enough, he saw the meat bathing in the barrels. Like his mother, his expression changed, his hand loosened and the root dropped. The son wanted to get closer to the barrels out of instinct.

However, he didn't even step forward two steps before being stopped by Chang.

"We do have meat, but why do you think it's any of your business?" Chang clenched the crossbow tightly; even though he looked severely injured, he was not chicken at all! Chang's charred and scarred chest scared the son into taking a step back.

"How can we not get involved, we live together, with you! Cheapskate!" Seeing her son withdraw, the woman was hot with emotion. "It was said in our Kaifeng idiom, the witness gets a share; if you are not going to do as I say, you won't get to have that meat either."

"Look at my body, old b\*tch! I even got half of my face burned, I almost exchanged my life for this food. I am not going to give anything to you, not even a single slice!" Chang pointed at his chin angrily, his eyes filled with rage.

"Well, guess what, I DON'T CARE! if you aren't sharing, I guarantee that you won't have a slice either. I will call everyone in the building and, if I were to shout loudly, the whole building... and the people in the next building would rush here. I'm pretty sure you wouldn't be able to handle the inflow of people, would you?" The mother crossed her arms in front of her chest. "You're welcome to try."

"Witch..." Her gesture made Chang so furious that his finger started trembling, and Pangzi stepped forward to hinder the

shameless pair.

“What! You wanna fight?’ The mother revealed her domineering nature as she felt intimidated by Chang and Pangzi. She raised her chin up high, “a few days ago, the military had published the <Temporary Public Secure Codes>. It says that fights are absolutely prohibited among citizens; whoever gets involved in the fights will be deported from this base regardless of whether they are right or wrong.”

“And the consequence of leaving here... the nightmare of being torn apart by some random monsters while you are sleeping will come true.”

“Like your son, huh?” Chang sneered.

“You!” the woman was shocked, and the atmosphere was extremely intense.

At this moment, it was Qing Shui who broke the tension; he seemed relax and walked to the window.

“Save some energy, both of you. I can give you some meat, but there are rules.” Qing Shui paced in front of the mother. “Two points: one, don’t tell anyone about the food. Of course, I believe you can keep this rule, because if you break it, both of us will starve, and I know you are clear about this.”

“And second, we will be eating raw meat; roasting or boiling it

will give off an aroma, and that will attract our neighbors for sure. Therefore, we can only eat raw meat. Is that a deal?”

# Chapter 50: Ruthless

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“Of course, of course we won’t say anything.” After confirming that they would have meat for dinner, the mother and son looked at each other and their eyes were filled with elation. They then returned to their own bed silently, showing that they were keeping their promise.

As the mother and son no longer disturbed them, Qing Shui lightly pulled the back of Chang’s shirt and said, “come with me.”

Qing Shui and Chang walked along the corridor and sat on the stairs. Chang was perplexed, “are you really going to give them our meat?”

“Did the acid burn your brain?” Qing Shui looked at Chang.

“No.”

“It didn’t burn my mind either.” The expression in Qing Shui’s eyes had changed; it conveyed a hint of resoluteness.

“You...” Looking into Qing Shui’s bright eyes, Chang sat there in a brief numbed daze. Then, he seemed to understand Qing Shui’s purpose, and he sighed heavily. “I see what you mean, so when?”

“At midnight; it’s easier to do it when everyone is asleep.”

“What about the military? What if they discover us?”

“I was concerned about this too. The military is very sensitive about conflicts in the base. They are afraid of riots and their negative impact, considering how contagious emotions can be.” As Qing Shui spoke, he took out a self-made cigarette and lit it up; the fire on the tip flickered, “Although they are concerned about the impact, it’s also the only concern they have.”

“As for missing personnel... they won’t care about much.”

“Indeed.” Chang nodded.

“You need to do it neatly; it’ll be too easy with your skills.” Qing Shui passed the cigarette to Chang and said, “Try it. I made it with leaves from a strange plant I saw a few days ago. It tastes pretty good and helps reduce pressure.”

Taking the cigarette, Chang inhaled deeply. It was fragrant and fruity as Qing Shui described.

“You can do it, can’t you? And, this should be your first time killing someone that’s unable to defend themselves.” Qing Shui stared at Chang, who was smoking non-stop. “It’s always stressful to kill someone, but we have no other choice in dealing with thugs and rascals.”

“These people will thank you for giving them food at first, but eventually they will become greedier. If one day we can’t get

sufficient meat to feed all of us, they will break their promise easily. And why do we have to share our food with them anyways? You knew better than me what kind of sacrifice we had made; you almost died from kidney failure from the burns, while Jing and I almost got caught by the Willow. We exchange our life for this food, so why can they just sit in the room to wait for us to serve them? This isn't just about the meat, but also lives of us three. I won't share our meat with anyone. You can say I'm selfish, but if they didn't contribute, they will never get a share either, at least not from me."

"If they act like thugs, so be it. They should think about the consequence before being one!"

"I understand... thank you for your explanation. It's brought me inner peace and it will be easier for me now. I understand what you mean." The corner of Chang's mouth curved into a wry smile. He finished the last bit of the cigarette and threw it on the floor before the flame caught his lips.

"Let's talk about something else. I've heard about the Willow, but Jing is still too young to explain thoroughly/ I want to know more about it."

"It's a super life; I don't know how to explain it well either. Its evolution speed is a lot faster than other species, and it's very special." Thinking of the Willow, Qing Shui's back bent unnaturally again, "It can control a human brain. It reads human memories and knowledge. It was even able to make connections among the brains and utilize each of their strengths, but it hadn't been able to acquire intelligence of its own."

“It’s already aware of itself, so becoming intelligent won’t be far away.”

“And thinking of humans, we have gone through numerous generations to become intelligent; within 20 days, it was plundered by other species. How sad is that! I really would like to know how many of these special species exist on this planet.” Chang felt depressed as he heard Qing Shui’s comment. He took a deep breath and asked, “The world is huge and Kaifeng is merely a small city in Northern China. If a super life like the Willow was born here, I doubt that there will be anymore around here.”

“I’m not sure about this, but I can assure you that there won’t be many of these super lives.” Qing Shui said, “We just happened to encounter one; the Willow is a rare example of an evolutionary miracle. Even though there might be other super lives, the ability of acquiring human brains is even rarer. If the Willow isn’t capable of thinking, it will just be a powerful and robust individual; in that case, we won’t even need to be concerned of its existence as it causes no harm to us.”

“It was a flawless coincidence; the Willow must be one of a kind.” Qing Shui made a summary, “I am not sure about the presence of super lives in other places on Earth, but there won’t be anything like the Willow.”

“I disagree, it was only 20 days, and our landscape is unimaginably wide and our oceans are so deep that humans haven’t gotten to discover it all! How could you be sure that there aren’t any other similar ones? And even though there isn’t any



right now, what about in the future? In this global evolution, everything is possible.” Chang stood up and pulled Qing Shui up with him. “Shall we go back? It’s quite useless to think about it too much, especially since it’s not helping us right now, so we’ll just do whatever we’re capable of.”

“As for other problems, we’ll have to leave it up to destiny.”

“Of course, let fate have its way.” Qing Shui patted on Chang’s back, and they walked along the dark corridor to their dorm room.

The thirst of the mother and son was obvious. They got up from the bed immediately as they saw Chang and Qing Shui come back to the room.

“Let’s have dinner now, the meat won’t taste as good later.”

“Great, make yourselves comfortable then.” Qing Shui snatched a glance at the two, and then warned them expressionlessly, “Don’t forget about the promise you have made.”

“Of course, we’ll keep our mouths shut.” The mother made a noisy assurance.

“Are you seriously giving out our meat to them?” Pangzi impatiently asked as he noticed that Qing Shui wasn’t going to change his mind. “We exchanged this meats with our life, so why would you do this?”

“Forget it; as long as we still live in this room, we need to maintain the harmony in here.” Chang patted on Pangzi’s shoulder as he tried to comfort him.

# Chapter 51: Soft And Gentle

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“Damn it, I really don’t understand what you’re thinking.” Pangzi mouth twitched as he unhappily said, “Since you got us all the food, I can’t say anything about who you will share it with. If you want to share with them, go ahead.”

“Well.” Chang sighed as well, he shot a strange glance at the two and realized that since the time he had decided to kill them, they seemed less unsightly.

Therefore, Chang waved at them and his mouth forced a smile, “Let’s eat together.”

“There we go; Chang is much more reasonable than you kids!” The mother expressed the elation of winning a bargain. She pulled up her son from the bed and spoke arrogantly to Pangzi, “It’s not a big deal. We are living together anyways, so why shouldn’t we help each other out?”

“Pooh, stop giving us that insincere flattery. If you were this reasonable before, why I didn’t get any help from you in the previous days. Not only had you not been helpful, but you also disturbed us. Don’t talk to me, I don’t care for your presence.” Pangzi turned away his head, and apparently, his attitude provoked the mother and son. But fortunately, Chang broke this awkward atmosphere in a timely manner.

“Come on, I guess you’re already hungry, since I am too.” Chang sat on his own bed and took a deep breath, “Jing, can you lock the

door?”

“Sure.” Jing nodded and fastened the latch.

On the other side, Qing Shui took out the frog meat from the formalin barrels and rinsed off the chemical thoroughly in the last barrel that filled with clear water. He tried his best to dilute the chemical residue on the meat and distributed one piece to each person in the room.

The piece was quite heavy even though the mother and son received it with both hands. Their dissatisfaction vanished immediately as they no longer complained. As if they were primitives, they chomped on the meat messily.

This was also Chang’s first time eating raw meat, but it didn’t taste bad and the texture was chewier than cooked meat. Although the pungent smell of formalin persisted on the meat, it was still much better than the vegetable ‘soup’ he had on the first day in the base.

Also, from observing from the gluttonous manner of the mother and son, Chang learned that the meat was much tastier than roots and grass.

Perhaps the discomfort from the burning made Chang lose his appetite, but he only finished half of his portion before he felt full. Chang stood up and placed his piece into the formalin solution again, and then he returned to his bed and stared at the air feebly, with unfocused eyes.

“Are you feeling unwell?” Pangzi asked Chang with concern. “Are you sure your burn has healed? Why it still so bloody? Do you want me to ask Dr. Huang to come over? Do you want some antibiotics as well?”

“Don’t worry, I feel pretty good except for the pain. It should be fine after a few days; I’ll take the medication on time.” Chang turned away his head so that he could avoid seeing everybody gnawing on the bloody raw meat.

“We’re finished; do you have more?” The mother’s voice was still there.

“Are you serious? We gave a pound of meat to each of you and you still want more?” It was Pangzi’s voice.

“Let them, they have been starving since the beginning, it must be not easy for them.” The last voice was Qing Shui’s. The sound of dripping and rinsing came after his words.

All these sounds upset Chang out of sudden, and Pangzi’s words snuck into his chaotic mind. It reminded him of that doctor, so he turned to look at that dull figure.

“Dr. Huang, thank you for taking care of me today, do you want some as well?” Chang shouted to the person who was facing the wall.

“I am not hungry.” The young woman turned and glanced at Chang warily as if there was something strange.

The emotion in her eyes stopped Chang from inviting her.

The silence caught into Chang’s mind. Before the night arrived completely, his mind was full of the sounds of the mother and son chomping. He leaned his back on the wall as if he was pondering, but his mind gradually became blank. The light disappeared at the horizon bit by bit.

“Jing, we can’t stay on the same bed as my chest and abdomen were burned. It hurts even though I only stroked it softly.” The darkness came very soon as time passed in silence, and the air cooled down. Chang helped Jing climb on the empty upper bunk bed, and he smiled with difficulty, “Are you afraid of sleeping on your own?”

“It’s fine, you should rest and get better soon.” Jing nodded to indicate that she wouldn’t be afraid, then she laid down on the bed. She closed her eyes even though she felt worried.

“The blood stain on the woven bag smells terrible. Do you want me to take it out of the room?” Before they went to bed, Pangzi noticed the bloody odor from the bags they used today.

“Just leave them there first, I’ll take them out tomorrow.” Qing Shui restrained Pangzi, “Go sleep.”

“Okay,” Pangzi didn’t say much either as he climbed on his own bed.

After settling down everyone in the room, Qing Shui took out the pills that he brought from the hospital today. He hunkered down and spoke in low voice, “Anti-inflammatory pills and antibiotics. You still need to be careful even though your body is stronger now. Take them and get some good rest.”

Qing Shui laid back on his bed as he made sure Chang swallowed the pills.

Chang didn’t take the pills at first as he stared at the little pills feebly. He put them in his mouth without reading any words on the instructions. The foggy world attracted all of his attention.

Later, the night had fully descended.

This night was especially long for a sleepless person; Chang silently counted numbers in his mind to pass the boredom. He kept doing so until his internal clock told him that the time had approached midnight and everyone’s breath became regular. Chang got out of bed without making any sound. He took out a knife from under his pillow and cautiously walked barefooted to the slumbering mother and son.

Chang’s footsteps were so soft and gentle that he couldn’t even notice his own movement. This move helped him approach his target without exposing himself, not to mention that his targets were asleep.

However, he was still extremely nervous. Although he already knew how to regulate his emotions and mind, the sourness in his mouth sold out his nervousness.

It was indeed the first time he would kill someone in a calm state. The last time he killed a human was to save Jing. When those thugs made a long cut on Jing's face with their dagger, he just couldn't repress his rage and killed them. He didn't feel anything special during the process aside from a slight pleasure. He behaved without any senses when he was furious.

However, this time was different. Chang wasn't angry at all; his mind was peaceful even though his body was tense. He knew exactly what he was going to do – kill them with the sharp knife, even though they were defenseless and completely vulnerable.



## Chapter 52: Hesitation

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Chang carefully crept over to the front of their bunk bed, but he wasn't even able to raise the knife as he gazed at their unruffled faces.

Somehow, this scenario and his hesitation were constantly pushing him to be more decisive as it was the right timing.

“If I were living in a web novel, I would definitely be an incompetent protagonist; I can't even kill someone who's totally vulnerable.” Chang smiled mockingly. He forced himself to think of their shameless behavior as if he was hypnotizing himself to feel better and to be more decisive.

From the beginning, they occupied the beds unfairly and accused him as a murderer; they even threatened him to share his food, and the look of them as they chomped greedily...

This recollection eased Chang's guilt of killing the mother and son, as he was no longer anxious. Chang stood tiptoed, and his right hand holding the knife passed through the gap between the rail and the bed. He confirmed the position of the son's neck by touching the pillow with his left hand. He then covered the son's mouth swiftly, and the knife followed the momentum and made a deep cut.

It was only an instant, and it was a simple process.

Chang only felt four sensations before the son was died: first was

the warm exhalation when he covered the son's mouth, and the second was the sensation of breaking strings when he cut through the muscle of the son's neck – it was the same feeling from when he cut off the bullfrog's tongue, but it was much easier this time. The third was the light trembling and convulsion of the son's body, and the last was a spring of warmth covering both his hands – it was blood.

These four things happening in less than 20 seconds, and thus a person had died. The time he used was less than one-hundredth of the time he waited in the dark. 25 years of the son's existence was erased in such a short amount of time.

Destruction was always much easier than creation.

Perhaps the slight shaking from the upper bed affected the lower bed, but the mother opened her eyes fuzzily.

The same moment she opened her eyes, she only saw the upper body of a man with a grim face. The next second, the coldness and pain on her neck made her breathing more difficult.

Chang stabbed the knife into the mother's throat. He finally witnessed the whole process of him killing a person as the mother was sleeping on the lower bed.

The knife went into her neck smoothly and the blade landed on the most fragile and vital part of the neck without any obstructions. Chang didn't even glance at the knife because he knew the woman would die from this. The reason that he didn't

look at the knife was simple; his attention was caught on her eyes – he never knew the expression in a person’s eyes could change this quickly.

As the knife buried into her neck, Chang saw the confusion in her eyes, and her panic came after. He read her baffled expression after three seconds – at the forth second, the change in her eyes was complicated.

In that one fleeting moment, her fear was the most obvious emotion. As if she thought of something, her fear was covered by sincere pleading.

Her mouth was wide open and she made her greatest effort to say something, but only a deep groaning could be heard. Her limbs clutched together and her hands were waving as if she was catching something in the air. She seemed to want to express something, but the knife in her throat and the gushing blood refrained her from doing so. The mother stared at Chang deeply, conveying her thoughts and hopes by her eyes and mouth.

Perhaps Chang was stunned by the expression in her eyes, or perhaps it was his first time concentrating so hard on killing a person, but Chang involuntarily tried to distinguish what her wish was.

“Pl...Plea...se...” the first word wasn’t surprising at all; she was begging for something.

“Don.. don’t... kill... m...” Another few words didn’t affect his

feeling either.

“M...my....so....son...” These were her last words.

The whole sentence put together was, “Please, don’t kill my son.” His mind went blank as if he was pulled out from reality. Whatever he saw became blurry, and his stomach convulsed. The hand that was holding the knife started shaking violently.

While his mind wandered away, the son’s blood finally permeated through his bed and a big drop of blood splashed on the mother’s face.

It really was a big drop of blood.

It covered her whole face.

The blood made her eyes red.

“No...” When this drop of blood smeared her eyes, her expression changed again as she realized the situation on the upper bed. She no longer pleaded; her pupils contracted in an instant and her body struggled violently as if she was using her last strength to get the anger and desperation out of her chest. The blood in her throat even dribbled from the corner of her mouth. All the effort she made resulted in a shriveled and weak yet emotional scream.

“No—” the brief and quiet scream was later covered by the bubbling sound from her throat. Her pupils began to dilate after

she lost her persistence – but during the whole process, her uplifted hands never withdrew from the air.

“Er...” Chang could not hold on any longer after the scream, he was extremely nauseous and threw up as if he was letting out all of his guilt.

The whole dorm was awakened and they witnessed this horrible and pathetic scene.

However, the first one who recovered from the stunning scene and got off the bed was the person who didn't sleep at all. He walked to Chang and patted on Chang's shoulder, and glanced at the person who was also awakened – Dr. Huang.

“You woke her up, we need to...”

“Don't, don't touch me! Don't ask me to kill someone again!” Chang pushed away Qing Shui's hand and he almost emptied his stomach. He slumped onto the ground and the expression of the mother pleading him kept flashing back into his mind.

Chang suddenly realized that even though the mother was impudent and shameless, she was merely a mother, like his own. She was a living person and a mother. She was evil in some sense, but she certainly didn't deserve death. In her last moment, her biggest reaction was not begging for life, but instead motherly love.

.....

Qing Shui stood beside Chang for a few seconds, and he then gave up on comforting Chang. He opened the door to observe if anyone noticed the events in the room. After confirming that no one heard or saw the events that occurred, he went back into the room and wrapped their dead bodies using the bed sheets. He then stuffed the bodies into two woven bags and he called Jing.

“Come, I need you to help me look for somewhere that has no traces of human. We need to throw them out.”

“Uh,” Jing nodded feebly. She looked at Chang, and then she turned to the doctor who was shaking on the bed fearfully, and finally jumped off the bed.

In the icy wind and under the dim moonlight, Qing Shui carried one bag on each side of his shoulders and went out with Jing.

## Chapter 53: Confession

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As Qing Shui and Jing went out of the room, Chang gradually felt better, and his stomach stopped twitching. He wiped off the residue beside his mouth and stood up from the ground.

Chang took the broom and cleaned up his vomit, and then returned to his bed.

“Don’t be afraid, I won’t kill you.” Chang rubbed his blood-covered hands against each other and tried to comfort the doctor who was trembling in fear on the corner of her bed.

“Trust me, he won’t kill you.” Pangzi accompanied Chang to calm the doctor. He made his voice softer, but at the same time justified himself, “They threatened us, so that’s what they deserved! I was wondering the whole day why you gave them our food; I would’ve never guessed your plan until I saw it now!”

Pangzi patted on Chang’s shoulder with joy.

“I’m just not used to this...” Chang shook his head as if he was shaking away the expression of the woman during her final moment; he went up to the water tank and rinsed off the blood on his hands and knife.

While Chang was cleaning himself up, Qing Shui and Jing came back with empty hands. He stood beside Chang and rinsed his hands along with Chang.

“I’m sorry for what happened just now; I got too emotional...” Chang cracked a difficult smile.

“Don’t worry about that, you did much better than I expected.” Qing Shui shook off the water on his hands and grinned at Chang, “It wasn’t you first time, was it?”

“No, it’s my second time.” Chang scratched his palm to remove the thick blood. “This time I’m calmer, but the thoughts in my mind were chaotic.”

“Don’t think too much, you really did a good job,” Qing Shui praised again.

“But I woke the doctor,” Chang rubbed on the back of his hands.

“Chang, think about this; no one can sleep tightly at the moment, and there’s no way that you can keep her asleep unless you drug her.” Qing Shui chuckled, “Even if she hadn’t woken up by then, the noise I made when moving the bodies was also loud. At that time, even the fine blood gushing sound could awaken the entire room, so stop thinking too much. You’re a really sensitive person.”

“It wasn’t me being too sensitive, but rather that those thoughts seemed to come from thin air; I just have to sort them out.” Chang finally cleaned up the blood stain and turned his back.

“There is only one thing I need to tell you – everything you do is



to survive in this cruel world!”

To survive!

Somehow Qing Shui’s word freed him from his worries. They were more useful than any polished persuasions. Chang laid down and let Qing Shui’s words wander in his mind; he didn’t even look at how Qing Shui was proposing the “secret deal” with the doctor, nor did he take care of Jing, who he was always concerned about. He was so relaxed that he fell asleep almost at the same moment his head touched the pillow.

He slept until the next morning.

When Chang opened his eyes, he realized this was his first time that he slept through the morning since the red fog. The fog had already brightened up by the sun light; he knew it was almost noon.

As he suddenly sat up, the first person he noticed was Qing Shui.

“Finally, you woke up.”

“Yeah.”

“Something went wrong.”

“What happened?”

“That doctor sold us out.” Qing Shui pointed at the door.

“How do you know?” Chang’s heart sunk, and he bounced up from the bed.

“I feel it.” Qing Shui’s index finger knocked on the bed beam. “She seemed strange since last night, and then she smiled to me when she went out of the room. It was weird, because it was the first time she ever smiled as I remember.”

“It must be a fake smile!” Qing Shui rubbed his hair, “and that fake smile must mean that she’s hiding something!”

The door opened again as Qing Shui spoke, and several armed soldiers walked in – the one who brought them over was the doctor.

“Someone reported to us that you murdered your roommates, and we also found pieces of nails and hair with blood around the courtyard.” The leader was the captain that they had met several times. He frowned, “I don’t need any explanation because we are soldiers, not policemen or judges. We have confirmed that the corpses were the residents of this room; they also went missing this morning, therefore you are under great suspicion.”

The captain seemed reluctant, “Forgive me, but we really don’t have time to investigate. Since you were reported and are the only suspects, we have no other choice but to deport you. Even if this might be unjust, this is the only thing we can do to protect the

base.”

“We understand.” Qing Shui nodded as the captain said, he didn’t continue on the topic but turned to the doctor, “Why did you do this to us?”

“I was only looking out for myself; I’m afraid I would be killed by one of you while I was asleep.” The doctor’s face returned to a dull look, but this time it was mixed with grim.

“I’ve told you already that we won’t kill you.” Chang was baffled.

“Hahaha, why would I believe in you? To be honest, I don’t trust you at all, nor what you have said.” The doctor stepped forward, “Each one of you is pretending; you shared food to us in the afternoon and then you killed them at night! What else could you not have done?”

“And you, you’re Chang, right? Don’t look at me with those innocent eyes! None of you are innocent, I knew it the first day we met.” The doctor became louder as she spoke, as if she was venting out her anger and grievances, but it might’ve also been a channel for her to express her fear these days. “Since the first day, you were taking the beds that didn’t belong to you! That family took three bed for four people and you were much greedier than them, you took four beds! Have you ever thought of how there was only one bed should for my family?”

“You were even able to fall asleep with peace in your mind. How dare you pretend that you are being nice to me? I bet you never

thought of giving one of your beds to my parents when they were dying!” Her voice was desperate, “Maybe you have thought of giving out one bed to us... but there must’ve been some other reason or excuse that you used to make yourself feel better for not giving your bed. Humans are selfish, I didn’t blame you, so don’t blame me for making such a decision today either.”

“I have no sense of security in staying together with you all, so I reported you. After you leave the base, you might not even have a shelter and be eaten by some monsters. Of course, you might be able to go through the first night, but what about the second...” The doctor’s voice was getting lower and lower, and her expressionless face returned. “But who cares about that? The only thing I want is to sleep here safely...”

Her voice became quieter as the door was opened again suddenly. Jing, Pangzi and Lin were detained back to the room.

Looking at Jing and Pangzi, Qing Shui was disappointed, “Captain, could you please let us stay in the base? We have meat, a lot of meat. It can be used to save someone’s life, perhaps that could cancel out part of our crime...”

Qing Shui pointed at the barrels, but the captain was obviously not persuaded.

“Like this, we can hunt. We only ask for a shelter to stay in and we will hand a part of the food we obtain to the military...”

The words made the captain raise his brows, but he still shook

his head determinedly.

Qing Shui understood how important it was to maintain the stability in the base from the captain's attitude. He heaved a long sigh and took a deep breath as he said, "Well, we are EMs."

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Notes:

\*EM refers to person with special ability, who also gained ability from encephalon mutation.

## Chapter 54: Decision

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“You’re an EM?” The captain frowned as Qing Shui confessed; his eyes clearly revealed a look of disbelief.

“Yes, an EM in the cognitive category. I can calculate that your breath frequency is 17.5 per minutes and your heartbeat is 85 per minute, just based on your last breath. And from how you’re standing and talking now, I know that your pulse is a little bit slower than your heartbeat, because you have light cardiac dysrhythmia.” Qing Shui stood with his hands behind his back. “This is something I learned from your physical condition; it’s easy to prove whether I’m lying or not just by having your body checked.”

As he spoke, Qing Shui raised his hands up high indicating that he wouldn’t revolt against the military. At first, the captain was stunned, but then he ordered two soldiers to detain Qing Shui from the room.

The other two soldiers loosened their guard as the captain left the room; as long as there was no organization or personnel that could stand against the military, the control of the military was immovable.

Therefore, those two soldiers removed their concealment and acted eagerly as they greedily stared at the barrels behind Chang’s back. Their Adam’s apples bobbed up and down and their faces were twisted with hunger.

“Hey bro, it seems like you’re quite capable to get this much meat,” The two soldiers implied.

“But it’s a pity that the meat isn’t valuable to us anymore, I don’t even know where I’ll be soon.” Chang understood their implication, so he removed two pieces of frog meat from the barrel and handed it to the soldiers and said, “It must not be easy for you these days; I heard that you guys only have one meal a day. Make yourselves comfortable, I probably won’t be able to bring these with me anyways.”

“Thanks mate!” Their fingers were trembling when they received food from Chang’s hands. “Although we have fixed meals every day, that small piece of biscuit isn’t enough at all! We felt like fainting all the time. You’re really generous, mate!”

“You’re welcome; my friend will be safe with the captain, won’t he?”

“He.... he will be fine!” As if they were afraid of being discovered by the captain, they devoured the piece as soon as it was handed to them. Of course, they didn’t forget about divulging the information that they traded with.

“Let me tell you, if that man is an EM, he will be treated like a treasure. We just got in touch with the military division in the capital city, and we only received three priority orders from above. The first is to maintain the stability in the base, the second is to attempt to grow mutated crops, and last but not least, is about EMs. They really care about these people and I heard from one of my folks from the provincial research institute that an EM has

power equal to that of a military base. Man, I don't know if this information is a rumor or not, but your friend will definitely be safe," The soldiers explained as they tucked into the frog meat hungrily.

"Good to hear that," Chang relieved with a long sigh. He pulled Jing over from the doorway and glanced at the doctor who reported them; they all stood quietly in the room to wait for the judgment of their fates.

Time passed in silence, and after Chang waited for three or four hours, Qing Shui returned. But this time, not only did the captain and two soldiers accompanied him, but also a middle-age man who appeared to have higher rank than any of the others. Chang squinted to count the stars on the man's epaulet, and he soon learned that this man was a colonel.

Kaifeng was such a small city that a colonel was the highest commander in this military base.

The colonel was skin-headed and his hair showed traces of gray. His face was tanned and expressionless. He had a small belly, but overall he seemed healthy and energetic.

"Are they your companions that you told me?" The colonel pointed at Chang and others.

"Yes," Qing Shui nodded.



“Alright, I can fulfill your request, but you need to go to the provincial research institute in Zhengzhou with our soldiers as soon as possible, and this is mandatory. I hope you can understand.” The colonel turned to Qing Shui “Of course, there is no doubt that the journey will be dangerous and difficult; we can’t drive cars to send you as we are running out of resources. The wild field is much more dangerous than in the city, therefore I will send troops to protect you on the way to Zhengzhou. This is all I have to say; I’ll be waiting outside of the room. You can discuss your decision with your friends, but give me an answer as soon as you can.”

The colonel closed the door and brought the captain and soldiers with him. They left the room to Qing Shui and others.

“What were you guys talking about?” Chang asked.

“They asked me to join the research group in the provincial research institute in Zhengzhou. It seems like they were interested in the red fog since 2 years ago, and recently they have become particularly interested in EMs. They want to built an elite team there to conduct research on the red fog and human genes.” As Qing Shui spoke, he threw his hands in the air, “However, it’s not promising, and I don’t know whether they will invite me to the team or dissect me as a research subject after we get there.”

“Then what should we do?” Pangzi and Lin seemed to be distressed.

“We don’t have much of a choice... unless Chang is 10 times stronger than he is now. Only then can he can ensure our safety

when living outside of the base. For now, we can only obey their orders...” Qing Shui laughed, “But the possibility of them dissecting me is low. I have my own plans as well, so don’t worry.”

“And what did the Colonel say?” Chang asked a critical question.

“He didn’t say a lot, but he meant to force me to go to that institute. And you guys... he said if I obey the order, they will still let you live in the base freely. However, you can also choose to leave with me; the choice of bringing companions was my only request to the Colonel.” Qing Shui grinned reluctantly and glanced at the doctor who appeared to be anxious. He continued to say, “I never thought that this time would come so soon... I was planning to leave this place when I prepared sufficiently or when Chang became stronger and more powerful...But now I must leave, and I didn’t plan for this. How about you guys, do you want to stay here or leave with me?”

“I...” Pangzi was going to shout out his decision, but Qing Shui interrupted him.

“You don’t need to make a quick and careless decision as the Colonel said. The wild fields are extremely dangerous. Even in the world now, the urban areas are still dominated by humans as the asphalt pavement and all sorts of architecture have slowed down the growth of plants and animals. But when we get into the wild fields, such as a forest or grasslands, the danger will increase exponentially since there will no longer be those barriers.”

“Therefore, I believe it’d be lucky if half of us ever get to Zhengzhou. So think carefully whether you’re leaving or staying.”

“I’m going with you.” Pangzi shouted out even before Qing Shui finished his sentence. “My mom is dead anyways, and I don’t have other relatives here. I just want to be with you guys. Even though this path is unpredictable and dangerous, I still want to stay with you. I will probably die somewhere in this f\*cking world, but dying beside you is less sad and lonely.”

“Okay, so you’re coming; what about you, Lin?” Qing Shui turned to Lin, “Don’t let other people affect your decision. We won’t blame you for your decision.”

“I...” Lin looked into Qing Shui’s eyes, and then she looked away. She glanced at everyone in the room and lowered her head as she said, “I...I am afraid...”

# Chapter 55: Leaving

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“No problem.” Qing Shui nodded, “Take good care of yourself.”

As he spoke, he approached Ling and gave her a hug, and he looked at the others as he passed around the question.

“Where do you want to go?” Chang didn’t answer the question himself and instead asked Jing first. “Although you’re still young, you should know that this decision is critical and important. Take your time to consider whether you’re leaving with Qing Shui or staying in the base.”

“I’ll go wherever you are going,” Jing stepped forward and said determinedly.

“You don’t need to...”

“I’m going to follow you wherever you go.” This was the first time that Jing interrupted Chang; she repeated the exact same words stubbornly.

“Alright,” Chang read the emotions in her eyes and gave a long sigh. He pulled her over and then patted on Qing Shui’s shoulder and said, “We are following you.”

“Are you sure?” Qing Shui hesitated and asked again.

“We are sure.”

“Good, then I will let the Colonel know that four of us are leaving for Zhengzhou.” Qing Shui took another glance at Lin. He turned away from everybody as he opened the door, and soon he was surrounded by those soldiers. He explained to the Colonel with lively gestures. After the Colonel nodded, most of the soldiers were dismissed except for 2 soldiers who were guarding the door and the window.

Qing Shui didn't leave until everyone went away, and then he threw his hands onto Chang and the others and said, “That's it.”

“When are we leaving?” Pangzi asked.

“Tomorrow, early in the morning. It's a bit too late if we leave today. We will go along the Zheng Kai Avenue at sunrise. The Zheng Kai Avenue is about 75 km long, and including the smaller paths, it's about 80 kilometers in total.” Qing Shui counted the number with his fingers as if it could make a greater impression of these numbers to the others. “It will take about an hour and a half to get to Zhengzhou if we could still drive. I've also went there before by bike, and it took me about 4 hours. If we were to walk to Zhengzhou, the time we need would be more than double. But fortunately, it's summer right now, which means that there's daylight for more than 14 hours. We're all stronger than before the red fog, so although the journey is going to be tough as we won't really have a flat and wide path to walk on, if we keep our pace at a certain rate and leave early in the morning, we should be able to get to our destination before it gets dark.”

“I see; then we need to prepare as much as we can.” After listening to Qing Shui, Chang knew that this trip was not only going to be alarmingly dangerous, but also rough. If they couldn’t get to Zhengzhou before sunset, then they would very likely die on the road.

After all, the jungle at nighttime was too dangerous.

“Jing, there will be a troop of soldiers accompanying us. You only need to stay with me at that time. Don’t call out when you notice danger around us; just tell me with a low voice and I will inform everybody.” Chang hunkered down and looked at Jing, and then carefully exhorted Jing again. “If the situation isn’t urgent, don’t let others know that you are an EM, because when we get to Zhengzhou, we don’t know what we are facing. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“Understood.”

“Alright. Tonight, we can have as much food as we want, as we can’t bring these with us anyway, nor can Lin finish all the frog meats in a few days.” Qing Shui pointed at the barrels. “We can cook the frog meat today, since the military knows we have food already, and we don’t need to worry about being discovered.”

At the same moment that everyone cheered up, the door opened again. The captain brought another soldier in the room.

“I brought you someone.” The captain coughed to get their attention, and put his right hand on this young soldier’s shoulder.

He seemed lean and robust, “The colonel referred him to me; he said this young man is one of the best EMs in our base, and it is said that he has had a greater degree of evolution than others after the Deadly Evolution period. He is strong and powerful. The colonel has already put him in the troop; I am just sending him here so that you guys can get to know each other in advance.”

“Hello everybody, I am Ming yi Shen.” As the captain made an introduction, the young man smiled ingenuously. He seemed like an honest and trustworthy person.

“I see, please say thank you for me to the Colonel and his subordinates.” Qing Shui also grinned at that young soldier and nodded to the captain.

“Sounds good!

After sending the captain away, Qing Shui went to the kitchen with that young soldier – apparently, he wanted to become closer to this highly evolved individual and at the same time, he also wanted to ask for some useful information – this was going to be beneficial to the group.

And more importantly, this young man’s mission was not limited to getting closer to Qing Shui and others, but also to watch over them. Therefore, it would be impossible to leave this young man behind, even though they didn’t plan to do so.

In this way, both parties carried out their own purposes and walked into the kitchen.

“Jing, what is his index?” Chang was at the end of the group when he carefully asked Jing with concern.

“9, it is a high index; that captain didn’t lie to us, he is definitely one of the best EMs in this base,” Jing whispered.

“Got it.” Chang stared at the back of this lean man, but he still couldn’t figure out how this body was stronger than the giant wolfhound he ran into. Somehow, he started to compare that man to himself – if he were to fight this young man, who would win?

Could he withstand the power of a pistol? How fast he could run and how high could he jump?

His questions would be answered tomorrow, so Chang left his concerns behind and put a smile on his face to have the last great meal in Kaifeng.

During dinner time, everyone was highly satisfied because of the cooked food, and since the atmosphere was harmonious, they got to know a little about this young soldier’s background.

The highly evolved soldier was only 19 years old, and came from a small village from the north. He just enrolled in the army when the red fog was already there, so he couldn’t use guns deftly. He was only sent to protect Qing Shui because he was a high level EM of the physical category.



Qing Shui and Chang loosened their guard after knowing that this young man didn't hold bad intentions. They went back to the dorm together after dinner. Chang spent almost 2 hours packing before going to bed – he left his giant backpack beside his pillow and hugged his crossbow in front of his chest.

The colonel sent an officer to wake them up before sunrise. Soon, they saw about 20 soldiers being brought over, led by the colonel.

“These men have been carefully chosen from my division to escort you to Zhengzhou; I kept the size of this troop relatively small as the effectiveness of escorting isn't determined by the number of people you have. But don't worry, they are elite soldiers.” The colonel asked the four to come out of the room and pointed at the row of soldiers. “Their physiques are stronger than others in my division, and they are experienced with weapons and fighting, so they can definitely ensure your safety on the way to Zhengzhou.”

“Thank you, Colonel,” Qing Shui bowed to the Colonel.

“No worries, I got this order from above, so you should say thank you to those people instead of me.” As the Colonel spoke, he glanced at everyone one by one and said, “Are you ready? Do you have any other requests?”

“We are pretty much ready to go, but I have one last request.” Qing Shui reopened the door and pointed at the doctor as he said, “I wanted her to come with us, because my friend Lin is staying in this dorm, and the doctor happened to had argument with us. I'm concerned about her safety since she will be here all by herself.”

# Chapter 56: The Grand World

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The Colonel pondered for a few seconds after hearing Qing shui, and as if he understood Qing shui's implication, he nodded and said, "Of course, it's also our duty to assure the safety of related personnel of our EMs."

The Colonel waved his hands as he ordered the soldiers, "Bring her!"

"No!!!" Doctor Huang screamed desolately as she was detained by those soldiers. "You can't do this!!! You are abusing power; I didn't commit any crime and you can't expel me from the base!!!"

Her cries alarmed the whole building, and some people were awakened from their dreams. These vigilant people opened their doors one by one to look for the cause of the scream, but they all shrank back when they noticed the uniforms in the dark.

However, at this moment, there were countless ears spying on them behind the closed doors.

"Someone from this woman's room went missing. Therefore, all of you are suspected of homicide. Under the govern of our temporary policy, you are all expelled from the Kaifeng military base." After the colonel announced this, he gave an order with a nod. The soldiers rudely pushed the doctor from the room to the corridor.

"Alright, I have fulfilled your requirement." The colonel glanced

at the doctor with disgust, and then he held out his hand and shook hands with Qing shui, and lowered his voice with caution as he whispered, “I hope you can keep your promise as well.”

“Of course.” Qing shui gave the colonel confirmation with a determined nod, and then he withdrew his right hand and took out a letter from his pocket. “This letter contains my experience of meeting an intelligent organism, I hope you have a chance to read it.”

“An intelligent organism?” The colonel took the letter, but his eyes revealed disbelief. “That’s impossible; do you have any idea of how long it has been? Even though the evolutionary rate is rapid now, I still don’t believe that there is an intelligent life form other than humans out there.”

“In fact, if I weren’t facing it in person, I wouldn’t believe it either.” Qing shui said, “I have informed you and given you the letter, so you can choose to believe it or not. I just think that humans should know about this before it is too late...To be honest, whether you believe it or not doesn’t bother me at all, because considering the size of Kaifeng and the power of the military here, it’d be impossible to find it, not to mention intimidating it in any way.”

Qing shui’s words apparently caused the colonel’s mind become uneasy, he put the letter into his pocket with some doubt. Time passed faster than they expected; the sky was slowly lit up by the sun.

“You should all leave.”

“Yes, and time won’t wait for us either. A minute of delay could possibly kill us.” Qing shui fastened the belt on his backpack. He took the lead and left the room.

Chang and Jing followed Qing shui tightly and Pangzi carried even more luggage with him. The group went through red fog in the corridor.

“Guys... be careful.” Lin’s eyes were filled with tears as she shouted loudly.

“Same to you,” Chang tilted his head and said resolutely.

“Stay alive,” Pangzi gave Lin a big bear hug.

“Take good care of yourself.” Even Qing shui, the person who was always resilient, joined in the hug. He grabbed on Lin’s arm tightly, “There is quite a bit of meat in the barrel and it should last for a few days. If you can’t finish them by yourself, you can share it with the military, so at least this way... they will treat you nicer. Be strong, be persistent. You can always make sacrifices for survival. Please... stay alive.”

“Thank..... thank you...” The girl in the circle had tears all over her face. “Guys... will we meet again someday?”

“I believe we will.” Chang held up Jing so that she could sit on his shoulders and smiled as he asked, “What do you guys think?”

“We will meet you again, of course!” Pangzi disguised his sobs with a hearty laugh.

“We’ll definitely meet again.” Qing shui loosened his hand and looked at Lin one last time, and then the four turned away and stepped into the dense fog in the early morning, and their figures slowly disappeared in the redness of the fog.

Finally, they started their new adventure.

.....

The soldiers followed up tightly with the four; in total, there were 20 people. The group was led by a mid-aged man and the young EM, Ming Yi. At the end of the group was the doctor, who was detained by two soldiers. She was still struggling to get away.

“Ming Yi, you should knock her out. If she keeps behaving like this, she’ll be a burden for our trip. We’ll wake her up again when we get on Zhengkai Avenue. By the time she knows where she is, she won’t run back to the base by herself recklessly.” The troop just left the building and the leader commanded the EM.

As the young man received the order, he carried out the order without resentment.

Ming Yi carried the doctor on his shoulder after she passed out. The doctor’s lost quite a lot weight the past few days due to

starvation. The weight of an adult woman was nothing to the EM, and he draped her like a piece of clothing without any effort. Then, the EM went back to the forefront of the troop again.

“Hey, buddy.” Seeing Ming Yi walking by his side, Pangzi curiously asked as if the gossip could distract him from the sorrow of separation. “I thought you were the lead of the team, why are you listening to him?”

“Uh, he is the vice leader of this troop, and he was my captain when I was in service.” Ming Yi whispered, “Although they appointed me as the leader of the mission, I am still an amateur. I don’t even know how to use guns, not to mention directing a troop! My captain has served the army for more than 10 years, and he even went to the border of China and India for a real war. It is better to have him in the commanding position rather than me, don’t you think?”

“Oh, I see.” Pangzi nodded, “What’s his name?”

“Yue Zhao.”

As Pangzi and Ming Yi kept whispering to each other, they fully left the base. The troop leader Zhao turned on a huge yellow flashlight and shook it towards to the sky to gain the attention of everyone.

“We are now officially leaving. I would like to say something before we get into the city jungle.” The troop made a circle around him swiftly. “Although you all know that Ming Yi was appointed as

leader of this troop, I don't want to give an explanation at this special period. He is still young and inexperienced, so I'll fill in the position of leader temporally. Does anyone has an issue with this?"

"No!" Almost all of the soldiers shouted. Obviously, some of them had served under this captain before.

"Good." Zhao nodded satisfyingly, he shook the flashlight purposely "This is a military flashlight we used in foggy days, and it was modified specifically for this mission, so all of you should be able to see a meter or two clearly with the lights ahead."

"However, be careful. The light isn't here to improve your vision field, but rather act as a guide." The captain stood on a big rock and spoke loudly in case someone couldn't hear him. "In this bloody fog, I believe everyone can only see within two or three meters, so if you are in the middle of the troop, you definitely can't see what's in front of us, not to mention those of you who are walking at the back."

"Therefore, when we move, you better take care of people in your surrounding as well. Follow each other one by one and don't get lost! If you get lost by accident, shout! Also, look for the light! Don't just stand there. The fog blocks sound, and I am sure you all know that, so if you miss the troop for more than 10 seconds, you will very likely become separated with the troop forever."

"One last thing to remember is to hold onto your weapons at all times! You need to make sure it can fire whenever you need to. But remember, if you aren't sure about where the danger is coming from, do not fire! You will hurt one of us mistakenly as we must

stay very close in this fog. If you hear someone fire their weapon, lie faced down to avoid potential accidental injuries. Does everyone understand?”

“Understood!” The soldiers responded uniformly and the four nodded as they agreed.

“Alright, since we are all on the same page, let’s leave this bloody hell.”

Zhao walked at the very front of the troop and was arranging his soldiers to escort the others in certain orders. As the strongest on the team, Ming Yi was sent to the very back of the troop to look out for unexpected dangers. As for Chang and Qing Shui, they were positioned in the center of the line, which was a relatively safe spot that both the front and back could cover. Chang, being the only one who could see further, carefully looked around to make sure none of them went missing. Qing shui reached into his pocket to grab a handful of plant powder, and then he scattered them onto the soldiers’ clothing with help from the wind.

This way, everyone was taken care of and this relatively small troop was bound together.

On this journey, they were lucky enough that they didn’t encounter any dangers; when they passed downtown, they happened to pass Chang’s home.

The home that he used to live in had completely collapsed. Traces of the past had been covered with the lively plants and ivy.



Chang didn't dare look at that place as a single glance could cause him to tear up badly. All the emotions and memories were left behind as he followed the troop and walked farther away from it.

Standing at the edge of the city of Kaifeng, they made a brief stop below the "Welcome to Kaifeng" billboard. They finally left the area where humans had occupied and urbanized. All of them were stunned by the grand world in front of them.

"This...this is truly extraordinary. Since when did the world become like this?"

## Chapter 57: Skinnier

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It was a thick forest that seemed impenetrable. Although none of them were able to get full view, from the appearance of the sturdy tree in front of them and the countless vines wrapped on the trunk, as well as the unique scent in the air, there must have been a huge jungle ahead of them.

The tinges of the jungle were stronger than any of the jungles on this planet prior to the red fog, and the vast vitality of this massive forest made everyone feel the urge to explore.

As the one who had the best vision of the troop, Chang could see the furthest. It was a grand feast interwoven by numerous lives—

The towering trees were tightened by a variety of vines; below the trees and vines, there were shrubs that no one had seen before. If the fungi and moss were to be counted, the plethora of life consisted of three layers with clear boundaries.

“A hymn of life, isn’t it? This world isn’t contained in concrete and steel.” Qing shui plucked some grass from the ground and put them under his nose.

“Is it possible for us to get through the jungle?” The fog was fused with the freshness of the sunshine in the early morning, and the croak from inside of the jungle raised one after another, as if the hosts were inviting them to step into the great feast. The jungle was so dangerously tempting that even Ming Yi, the strongest one in the troop, had raised doubt.

“I...I don’t see a path at all!” The soldiers at the front was searching around, but failed to locate where Zhengkai Avenue should be.

“There should be traces; try to look for broken concrete blocks; those remnants will be our guide to Zhengzhou.” The leader Zhao hunkered down and spread apart the grass with caution. Sure enough, he found some concrete pieces with obvious traces of artifacts.

Zhao raised his hand and shouted to the troop behind his back, “The Zhengkai Avenue has been shattered by these plants and their roots; what we have now are the remnants. But fortunately, it hasn’t been too long and we can still follow these concrete sediments to Zhengzhou.”

“Look at the plants around! There are places that have less plants growing; that must be where the Zhengkai Avenue was.” Qing shui stepped forward to the front of the troop; he carefully examined the way these plants were growing. “Therefore, this is a method for us to find our way back as well.”

“He’s right.” Zhao was stunned by Qing shui that he was able to sort out a second way to locate the avenue. Zhao had known that Qing shui was an EM, so he recovered from his shock quite soon.

“Captain Zhao...” staring at the dense jungle ahead, Qing shui asked with his brows tightened together. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“How many times have we had contact with Zhengzhou since the red fog?”

“Three times,” Zhao answered. “At least, from what I know it’s been three times.”

“How did the base get in contact with Zhengzhou?”

“They set up an emergency communication troop that was dedicated to sending out documents and orders from central to the cities around,” Zhao said. “It seems like there were quite a lot of these troops; they were probably from reconnaissance or the field army. Each of them consisted of 100 people, and their one and only mission was to deliver documents and orders. We have to use this primitive method, as the radio and cable communication have been cut off.”

“Three times...” Qing shui rubbed his jaw and asked, “what about the casualties?”

“The first troop came in 10 days ago and there were more than 10 deaths; the second one had more than 20 deaths, and the third time happened 6 days ago, only a day later than the second one that happened 7 days ago. More than 30 died in the third troop.” Zhao recalled and he frowned, “many soldiers died.”

“No...that’s not high at all; can 100 ordinary people really make it through this jungle?” Qing shui stepped forward and pressed on the trunk of a tree; he seemed scared.

Sensing the fear from Qing shui’s tone, one of the soldiers stepped out and asked with a half-joking tone, “What now, an EM is afraid of death too?”

“Of course.” Qing shui didn’t look back but carefully observed the textures of the tree in front of his eyes, as if that could tell him the growth cycle of this tree.

“Let me tell you something more terrifying. I heard there is a rumor flying around in the base – there was a troop that came from Zhengzhou three days ago. It was still a 100-person troop, but only 20 arrived to the base, and most of them were heavily injured.” The soldier joked and patted on Qing shui’s shoulder. “What about this? There is an almost 100 percent casualty rate.”

The soldier didn’t speak aloud, but it was still heard by the Captain. Zhao turned around and slapped on the soldier’s face heavily, “Bullshit! What are you thinking about? You really can make jokes of everything, can’t you? If the colonel heard you instead of me, you would be imprisoned for spreading rumors! Shut your mouth and go back to your position!”

That young soldier twitched his mouth and return to the line with a sulking expression.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Li. Don’t listen to him; he’s still young and knows

nothing about what happened in the base.” Zhao also curled his lips. Apparently, that soldier was one of his favorites, otherwise he wouldn’t let him joke around in the first place.

“I know his intent wasn’t to cause any chaos; it was just a way to vent his fear. I can tell he’s the most scared out of all of us.” Qing shui glanced at that young soldier, but he was still worried. “But, I don’t think he was talking nonsense; the jungle must be more dangerous than ever.”

“It’s just a jungle, and we have firearms. Even though there are more mutated organisms than in the urban area, the 20 of us are the best warriors in the base, so we should be fine.” Zhao was affected by Qing shui’s worry, but after all he was experienced and knowledgeable, so he wasn’t stopped by the obstruction ahead of him. “We’ll just be extra careful.”

“Yeah.” Qing shui nodded as he agreed, and then he went back into the center of the line.

“Let’s go.” Zhao waved the flashlight a few more times to signal the troop to go forward. As the leader, he was the first one to step into this lush jungle.

The whole troop entered the mysterious jungle one by one, and Chang felt that the fog had become thicker than outside. Due to the massive amount of plants in the jungle and most of them covering a large area, even Chang had a hard time looking further.

Jing was lying on Chang’s back; he put Jing’s arms around his

neck and whispered to her, “Just tell me whenever danger comes.”

“I know,” Jing trembled of fear. Those hanging vines from the unseen branches above their head made her scared. She huddled her head and hunched her body as if she was trying to hide herself from the surrounding. Her entire face was buried into Chang’s back.

The group of people just walked in the jungle. The people at the front carefully traced the gravel forward and the people at the back followed tightly one by one. They were extremely alerted and had to keep up with their pace at the same time. The soldier who was joking around clenched his rifle, and his face had already turned pale before Chang noticed.

After moving forward a few kilometers, there wasn’t any visible danger that could be seen, no one could relax at this point. Nervousness and fear had been written all over their faces, and they had been looking around to make sure no one went missing. The atmosphere was even more depressing than the air in the jungle.

“Hey bro, do you want to talk? I feel dizzy; the atmosphere is too depressing here.” The young soldier lightly poked Chang with his elbow, and he turned his head to try to start a conversation with Chang.

“Oh.” Chang was alarmed by his contact, so he also turned his head around, but he frowned immediately and asked, “Hey, why do you look skinnier than before?”

“Skinnier?” The soldier touched his face, and wherever his fingers went, all he touched was his leathery cheeks and prominent cheekbones.

“What’s wrong?” The soldier shivered suddenly.



## Chapter 58: Dodder

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“Who knows, you just look skinnier and paler to me.” Chang looked at the young soldier up and down, but he didn’t find any signs of visible attacks, so he then asked, “Are you sick?”

“That’s impossible. If I were sick, I would have died in the Deadly Evolution period; I must have been attacked by something.” The young soldier loosened his gun and took off his camouflage uniform in a flurry. He touched every inch of his skin to check for anything strange. A moment after, when he got to his waist, he noticed there were lumps bulging from his skin.

“F\*ck!” He shouted in panic. He further removed the camouflage on his upper body, exposing a tight t-shirt beneath the uniform.

“It seems like you tucked something underneath your t-shirt.”

“What?” The soldier took off his t-shirt in panic. When they saw clearly what had attached to his skin, they had goosebumps all over.

“What’s wrong?” The stir at the back alarmed Zhao; he stopped and moved back along the line, and was stunned by the strange scene.

“This is disgusting! What is this?” Zhao only saw the young soldier hastily plucking some sort of tassels from his skin – those stems and tassels had firmly attached on his body, as if a leech was sucking up his blood and fat.

“It looks like dodder.” Qing shui followed Zhao and pointed at the stems and tassel. “You didn’t feel it when it climbed onto you?”

“Of course he didn’t feel anything. Otherwise he would have known before these things got so plump.” Chang looked over the soldier again and his struggle made him nauseous. – those plants literally wrapped around his waist tightly, and the tiny prickles penetrated into his muscles and blood vessels. The dodder kept taking his blood and fat through straw-like holes on each prickle; perhaps the dodder had been on his body for quite a while, as the green membrane was now mixed with red and yellow from the color of blood and fat. The tassels were plump.

“Son of a b\*tch, no wonder I felt dizzy just now; it turned out something was sucking my blood constantly.” He threw the dodder onto the ground angrily, and then stepped on it. The membrane was crushed by the pressure and the blood and fat splashed all over. As if the dodder could sense pain, it rolled around and attempted to drill downwards.

“They are dodder for sure.” Qing shui pinched at the “tail” of the dodder to pull it out from the ground, and it was still struggling on his palm.

“What exactly is dodder?” Chang also went ahead to check his body while he was asking, and sure enough he found a smaller one in his pants. Fortunately, it hadn’t been too long, and the plant sneak in so it hadn’t penetrated his skin yet.

“Dodder is a kind of parasitic plant, and can be rootless after it reaches adulthood; they usually parasitize on plants, but now, even animals can be their targets.” Qing shui stirred around the dodder on his palm, but carefully avoided the prickles on the tassel. “The prickles can be paralyzing, and like the mouth of a mosquito, it doesn’t really feel anything when it pokes into your body.”

“Sh\*t, that was such a shock.” Chang ripped off the dodder on his leg and trampled this ghost-like plant, and then shouted, “Check if you have dodder on your body, it will drain your blood before you even know it!”

With his shout, the troop knew what had happened, so they all hurriedly removed their camouflage to check if there were any dodder on their bodies – about three or four soldiers discovered these horrifying tassels.

“Mr. Li, do you think this plant is venomous?” Asked a soldier who had suffered the most from this misfortune. His cheeks were sunken due to excessive loss of blood. He apparently was the most frightened – if this plant was venomous, he could have been dead.

“I don’t know...but it shouldn’t be venomous.” Qing shui carefully observed the prickles on the tassel and asked, “Do you feel nauseous or have any muscle spasms?”

“No, I am just dizzy.” That man shook his head.

“Then that’s fine. You just lost too much blood; that’s likely the cause of your dizziness.” Qing shui threw away the dodder from his

palm, and he shouted to the whole troop, “From now on, we need to pay extra attention to the surroundings. There are too many lurkers in the jungle, so you need to check if you are attacked once in a while.”

“Got it.”

“Understood.”

There were sporadic answers from the back and sounds from soldiers removing their uniforms. A moment later, all soldiers had finished checking their condition and the surrounding quieted down again.

“Jing, why you were not aware of these dodders?” After re-packing their bags, Chang carefully whispered to Jing. He even thought before entering the jungle – as long as Jing was with him, he would be well-prepared in advance even if he was to receive attacks. However, these lurkers soundlessly educated him with what a real sneak attack was. An attack that could drain you slowly, without ever knowing about it until you die.

“I didn’t know...I thought it was just grass, since they have the same kind of life features to me; and I only had a weak sensation of them...” Jing’s eyes were full of grievance. “I am sorry...if you didn’t notice that soon enough, you and that soldier would have been dead already...”

“Don’t apologize, I am not blaming you. I guess the dodder came from underground, and it would be hard for you to detect

anything.” Chang rolled up his pants to make his ankles exposed within his sight, so that he could find out earlier when a similar attack found him next time.

“Hurry up, the smell of blood is too heavy in here, and I am afraid that carnivores will find us.” Qing shui took a glance at the blood stain and asked the soldier who was injured the most, “Can you still walk?”

“Yes, I can. Don’t worry.” That man shook his head hard, as if that could drive away some dizziness.

“Alright folks, let’s move!” The jungle was so bizarrely dangerous that Zhao realized the troop was at risk at any time. He waved his hands and raised the flashlight higher to gesture the soldiers to move forward with him.

However, the jungle appeared to not treat them nicely. When Zhao had just raised the flashlight, Jing whispered to Chang warily.

“Chang, there is a big group of 0.2 organism coming from 100 meters away; they are fast.” As Jing spoke, a burst of flapping sounds came from a far end. Chang hadn’t had a chance to warn the troop as the cause of the sound had already appeared in front of them.

It was a group of morphologically strange birds that flew over their head. Their beaks were sharp like perfect cones and the size of their heads were as big as humans. As soon as they noticed a

group of humans on the ground, they swooped down towards the troop and their eyes were scarlet red and oddly small. Apparently, they didn't come with good intention.

“Folks! There is something in the air!” By the time Chang had just dropped his words, a big bird sped up and aimed at his head, but it was knocked out heavily by Chang's crossbow swing in the air.

“F\*ck!” The big bird lost consciousness temporarily, but Chang wanted to stamp on its head to make sure it was dead. However, the group of birds didn't leave him a chance to do so, and instead, they all swooped down at the same time. Judging from this situation, Chang was forced to dodge behind a tree and cover Jing with his back.

“Fire your weapons to the sky, everyone!” Zhao's voice went through the fog. “Be careful of your angle, do not hurt anyone around you!”

A wave of gunshots blasted in the air as the captain commanded. The strategy was effective and the birds withdrew immediately, but they were still hovering in the air – anyone could tell they did not intend to leave yet.

“They have not yet left!” The echo of the gunshot got soaked up by the fog, yet Chang's voice again resounded. “They are hovering over us; they probably won't leave until they get something out of us!”

Chang knew that none of the soldiers would be capable at this moment to impact the flock, therefore he squinted his left eye and aimed the crossbow at the leader of these birds.

“Whoosh!”

The bolt was ejected by the force of the mechanical spring in the crossbow. It was so fast that the bird hadn't had a moment to realize a bolt had penetrated through its torso; a flower of blood and feathers blasted in the air that looked like a bloodily aesthetic illustration.

Chang almost screamed blissfully, but the birds had made their move already. The blood smell stimulated their brain intensively, and the beautiful illustration was torn apart by their sharp beaks in the air. Countless pieces that came from the dead body were soon swallowed, leaving the only one in the troop who could see the war, Chang, speechless.

The reality was cruel enough just as Chang was once again warned by Jing in an even tenser tone.

“There...there is another group. They are more aggressive! 0.5!”

“You've got to be kidding me... we can't even escape from them...” His heart sunk. A wave of buzzing sounds gradually became clearer.

A group of mosquito-like insects came in Chang's line of sight,

but with slightly different stingers – they were all equipped with sword-like stingers. The flock fled in all directions as if they were freaked out. Some slower ones were firmly captured by the legs of these giant insects, and later became their ample breakfast.



# Chapter 59: Disguise

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Of course, those carnivorous mosquitoes wouldn't be only interested in birds; those larger organisms – humans, were included as their targets. Therefore, some mosquitoes were tempted to attack immediately.

However, the amount of mosquitoes that were interested in humans were a minority, and most of their attention was still on the birds in the sky; they were certainly more eager to get those birds that were their favorite prey than human that they had not seen before. The attack of these curious mosquitoes didn't give the troop too much pressure – instead, the troop finally got a chance to escape from the flock.

“Move, move! Let's go before they notice us.” Zhao, as an experienced captain, knew that this precious opportunity wouldn't likely come twice; he shouted loudly to the troop and waved the flashlight in his hand at the same time, hoping that the flashlight could signal the troop to move forward.

Chang grabbed Jing's hand and ran to the halo as soon as he saw it. They re-gathered with the troop thanks to Zhao's cue; the troop steadily and orderly went around the mosquitoes and the flock. While they were retreating from the chaos, only one mosquito attempted to pierce Chang with its needle-like mouth; however, this poor mosquito was not threatening at all once it left its group.

Chang pulled out a knife that he stole from the kitchen in the base and patiently waited until the mosquito got in front of him. Chang tilted back his body to avoid the crash and sliced down its

head following the momentum. They left the “war zone” quietly and hastily.

They trotted along the broken pavement until they were few kilometers away, and then Zhao halted the troop and started counting the remaining number of people.

“One, two, third, four...” Zhao scanned around the troop one by one, and for each person he shined with the light, he counted one until the end of the line.

“....29, we are missing two.” Zhao found out two soldiers had been lost somewhere – including Chang and his friends, there were 22 soldiers and 4 officers that had followed along. Including Doctor Huang, there should have been 31 people in total; they hadn’t gone very far from Kaifeng, yet 2 had already went missing, causing Zhao to be both worried and angry.

“Could it be the case that they are still following up?” The vision of an ordinary person was limited to 3 meters, so unless they stayed close to each other, getting lost could happen in a few seconds. The double shock from the flock of birds and the mosquitoes made them flee in different directions, and the circumstances they were facing now was unavoidable.

“We should wait,” Someone suggested.

“What if they never come back?”

“Should we separate to find them?” Someone advised again.

The unrealistic proposal was rejected immediately.

“Separate?” Someone yelled “Are you crazy? We’ll never get together again if we ever go in different directions, and the fog could make you wander around in the jungle forever. If we didn’t have this broken pavement, we would’ve likely stayed in this freaking jungle for the rest of our lives, which would probably be less than 2 days.”

His words were cruel, but real. The troop seemed to be stuck in a strange cycle of deciding whether they should wait or leave.

“How about...I go find them?” Chang broke the chaotic train of thoughts, “I can follow along the trace of rubble, and I have better vision than most of you, perhaps I can find them.”

In this moment of desperation, Chang no longer intended to hide his ability. He knew from the bottom of his heart that they were on the same boat no matter what, so one person being lost meant that the chance they would survive through this journey was also reduced – if the troop only had 2 or 3 people left, then even a tiny danger could put them at the point of no return.

“You have better vision than us?” Zhao stared at Chang in seriousness.

“Yes, this is the ability I gained from mutation, I can go look for

them.”

“Great, since you asked for it, let Ming Yi be your companion. He has a strong physique and you have good vision; if you were to go together, the chance of death is a lot smaller for both of you.” As Zhao spoke, he pushed Ming Yi forward from the back. “You can put her down, Ming Yi. She was already awake when we fired our guns.”

“Yes sir.” He put down the woman without even looking at her frightened face. He borrowed a machete from one of the soldiers and stood by Chang.

“Come back in half an hour....” Qing shui joined the conversation, “If you still don’t see a trace of them in half an hour, just give up; we don’t have much time to waste, and you know that Chang.”

“I know.” Chang nodded and turned away. He also carried Jing with him and waved to Ming Yi as they both returned to the path they came from.

They slowly walked back on the track that they fled from, they neither wanted to get too close to that “War zone”, nor did they want to go off the rubble track too far. The three looked back and forth and a while after, Jing sensed something strange.

“Chang, there are three living organisms in front of us, and they are on your left side; two are level 4, one is level 2.5.” Jing whispered to Chang; her voice was so low that she couldn’t even

hear herself clearly, but she knew Chang already understood what she had said.

“2.5?” Chang tilted his head.

2.5 was the exact index of those elite warriors, and the spot they were standing at was not far from either the “War zone” or the troop. If it was 2.5 for sure, it was worthy to check out. As for those level 4 organisms... Chang believed they could handle them with ease as Ming Yi was a level 9 soldier.

“Ming Yi, let’s head over there.” Chang pointed at the direction where Jing told him.

“Should we? We will stray from the route if you insist.” As Ming Yi followed along, he became more uncertain as he went further.

“Trust me, we won’t be far away, it is just 100 meters.” Chang insisted. “Don’t worry, I can find our way back.”

“Oh, okay.” Ming Yi clenched his machete and followed the figure in front of him to the other end of the jungle.

The jungle ahead of them was significantly denser after they went off from the Zhengkai Avenue. Chang kindly asked Jing to jump down from his back so that he could keep his head low while moving forward. Relying on his superior vision, he saw one of the soldiers at the other end.

A middle-aged soldier was looking around with the gun held in his hands. Worry and anxiousness were displayed through his gestures and face; it was clear that he had gotten lost for a while.

Chang was delighted when he saw him, but he didn't call out. Those level 4 organisms were still invisible to him, and that had concerned him quite a lot. Therefore, he placed a bolt on the string without making much noise; he then walked backward and squatted in the bushes to observe any signs of disturbance. However, he didn't get anything out of the whole observation; it got to the point where even Ming Yi had lost his patience.

"Where are the level 4 organisms you were talking about?" Chang pulled Jing over, as he spoke in an extremely low voice. "How could I not see any?"

"They are right in front of you! Just right beside the level 2.5." Although Jing couldn't see the soldier, she could sense his existence. It was all crisp and clear in her brain.

"There is one." She pointed at the direction of the soldier, but Chang only saw a bunch of green ferns; while he was puzzled, Jing pointed at another direction that was close to the last one, and it was the same kind of fern. "There is another one," Jing added.

"Another plant hunter, hah?" Chang subconsciously squinted his eyes to try to look more carefully, but he still failed to find any traces of life.

"They should not be plants...I am not very sensitive to plants in

this mass jungle.” Jing blinked her eyes. “If I can perceive them from that far, they must be some kind of animal, or at least insects.”

“Animals...insects...” Chang moved forward again for 3 meters, and he was now 10 meters away from the ferns. Finally, he found traces of active life forms – eyes.

# Chapter 60: Mantis

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Those pairs of eyes were well hidden; they were as green as the ferns around them, and what made them more strange was that they didn't even have pupils. They blended so well with their body that if Chang didn't know their presence beforehand, he would've walked pass the fern without knowing he was under surveillance. This plant-like organism was an excellent hidden attacker.

Obviously, if anyone were to bypass them without noticing their existence, then there would be only one consequence – death. Regardless of what level they were, even though they were much weaker than him, as long as he was unprepared, his fate would be death in this jungle.

However, since Chang had learned that there were 2 lurkers, he was no longer concerned about them. As those eyes got closer and closer to the soldier, Chang hastily shouted out to remind him.

“Hey! Be careful!” Chang jumped out from the bush, “Something is behind your back!”

“What?” That soldier seemed relieved as he heard a human voice, and he quickly walked towards to the source of the sound.

“There is something behind your back!” Chang reminded him again.

“Something behind me?” The soldier looked back, but he noticed nothing except for some bushes and saplings. “What are you



talking about? Where are you? Are you alone too?”

The man kept asking in a high volume, but what he didn't know was that a “sapling” behind him straightened its body, and it moved as swift as wind but silently.

The “plant” bided his time well; it was so unnoticeable that no one would ever be aware of its presence. The next second, it had become a killer. As it moved, only a flash of green light was seen, but the soldier who was alive a second ago, now had his head disconnected from his body permanently – a brisk wave chopped off his head like a sickle. Perhaps he was decapitated too fast, so the flying head was not instantly dead in the air. For a moment, he was even able to make an expression.

From surprise to terror!

The terror was seized forever on that face – “bang” – the head landed on the ground and rolled forward, and thus a lively body had completely lost the breath of life.

“F\*ck!” Accompanying a curse was a bolt ejected from the crossbow.

Whoosh!

10 meters was not a far distance for that bolt to travel as it firmly stabbed into that monster's body.

The sharp spine penetrated the green armor, causing mild damage.

The monster turned around as it received an unexpected attack. It swung back and forth as if it was looking for the attacker. However, it lost its disguise as it changed its position, and finally Chang knew the identity of these creatures.

They were two mantises. They weren't huge in particular, but the lines of their figure were smooth and sophisticated, like well-built architecture. They stood with four limbs and their "sickles" were wide open. Although they stood up completely, they still looked like saplings. They looked extremely vigorous even though they were only as high as two-thirds of a human adult.

"What's going on?" Ming Yi stood beside Chang the whole time. but he didn't see the tragedy in the fog. He first saw Chang and Jing whispering to each other, and then he heard Chang communicate with a person that he didn't see. When he thought they finally found the soldier, Chang shouted "monsters" and shot a bolt. It was rather confusing to him how Chang acted.

"Two monsters attacked the soldier." Chang pointed to the murky fog and described it to Ming Yi, "They seem like mantises, and they are smaller than us, but they are hard to deal with. Be prepared."

"Alright."

Chang's words had hardly finished before the antennae of the

mantises jiggled around on their head. They seemed to have determined the source of sound in the air; they then made a great jump to where Chang was hiding.

“They are coming!” Seeing the monster turn their heads, Chang pushed away Jing and rolled over to the other side of the bush.

Ming Yi was only able to see them once they entered his sight, therefore he was one second slower than Chang. A tibia waved at his neck directly.

“Sh\*t!” The first thing Ming Yi saw was the sickle-like tibia swinging to him. He bawled out and quickly dodged; he was almost twice as fast as the mantis. He flipped over the machete that he held in his right hand and gashed its abdomen that had no armor covering it, causing the abdomen to be sliced open widely from the bottom up.

As Ming Yi made a deep cut, he performed a spinning kick at the mantis, breaking off its body like a twig. Tons of green mucus spewed out from the wound he inflicted.

“What a powerful and brisk kick!” Chang praised as he saw from the far.

Chang didn’t forget to refill the crossbow as he praised Ming Yi. He shot a second bolt to stop the sneak attack from the other mantis.

The extra time that Chang stalled the mantis for gave Ming Yi long enough to behead the other mantis with his backhand attack – he seemed as effortless as Chang beheaded that mosquito.

The winner of a deadly conflict was usually determined in a flash. There wasn't any so-called final attack in this survival game. It was all about who caught the right timing.

“It was a powerful fight! I thought it was going to be uneasy.” Chang put away the crossbow and showed himself to Ming Yi from the thick fog. He pulled out the bolts on the mantises' dead body and tried to shake away the sticky green mucus.

“It was nothing; I reacted a lot faster than them and I was stronger. Also, you helped me distract the other one, so this result was expected.” Ming Yi gazed at the mantis corpses expressionlessly and said, “They aren't good at attacking at all. Instead, it was their camouflage skills that helped their success. Look at them, they are just saplings to me! I have known that mantises were good at disguising themselves in bushes; they just blended into the surrounding with ease. But now I realize they are even better than before! I still have a hard time telling them apart from the saplings. If I didn't know that they were aiming at me, I would have been dead even though I am stronger.”

“Exactly...being stronger doesn't mean you can win a battle sometimes.” Chang recalled how the soldier was decapitated by the mantis at such a small distance, and even Ming Yi nor Chang wouldn't be able to dodge it.

“Where is he?” Ming Yi asked.

“He is dead, the body is over there.” Chang pointed in a direction in the fog; he didn’t even know the name of that poor man.

“I need to check him out. There aren’t any mantises around us, are there?”

“No.”

“Thanks.” Ming Yi strode to the location that Chang referred to. The bloodiness and the head were the first things that entered his sight.

Perhaps Ming Yi had seen quite amount of death and different corpses, but he didn’t react much when he saw the scene. He hunkered down to collect food and clips from the headless body, and then returned to Chang.

“Do you know him?” Chang was a bit surprised that Ming Yi did not display any emotional fluctuations as he pointed at the dead soldier.

“Not really, he wasn’t in my company, but I met him a few times before. I only knew that his family name was Cao.”

# Chapter 61: Flower Shrub

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“I see.” Chang nodded with sorrow – the soldier was dead, without anyone having known his name. A life vanished in this lush jungle, without the accompaniment of friends and family.

“God...” Chang turned away from the corpse and found Jing, who was pushed to the other side of the bush. He picked her up and held her tightly and silently as if he feared that Jing would pass from his sight before he could notice. Chang loosened his arms after a second or two, and started to repack his backpack, he said to Mingyi without looking at him, “Let’s go, we still have others to look for.”

“Sure.” Mingyi’s voice came from the fog, he again followed Chang to return to the Zheng Kai Avenue.

The subsequent 15-minute walk was filled with the intermittent joy of discovery, but unfortunately, none of these traces of life belonged to humans. To avoid potential trouble and danger, they did not really look into them. Chang was always aware of the timeframe that Qing Shui set to them, and a few minutes later, they decided to return as they didn’t find any human.

“We should go back now. It has been almost half an hour. We’ll be delaying the expedition if we don’t leave now.”

“Okay.”

They returned with a shade of blue, after about 15 minutes, they

re-joined the troop.

“You didn’t find anyone?” A look of disappointment passed over Zhao’s face when he noticed the number of people did not increase as they came back.

“We actually found one, but a mantis attacked him...” Mingyi turned in the clips and food he found on the corpse to Zhao.

“These belonged to Cao Wei...what a pity.” Zhao was sentimental over the soldier’s death.

Although Zhao was upset about the loss of soldiers in his troop, he didn’t let the emotion keep him in place. “I guess the other one has gone missing already. In consideration of the majority, we should leave now.” Zhao waved the military flashlight in his right hand while announcing his decision of abandoning the other soldier.

Zhao didn’t command Chang to do more for the troop even when he knew of Chang’s capability. Chang was still placed in the middle of the troop to look out for losing soldiers, however, even without Zhao’s orders, he was already wary of the surroundings.

The journey kept on going for nearly three hours straight. The Sun radiated over their scalps, and the red fog was lit up into its most saturated color. They, fortunately, did not encounter any danger but the physical exertion was so intense that the troop had to rest for a few minutes to hydrate and snack.

The military prepared crackers for the troops but they were almost inedible. Chang unzipped his backpack with both his hands, he took out a plastic bag with frog meat and unwrapped it. They made a small circle when sitting on the ground.

The military had their own circle while Chang and his friends had their own. There was only one person isolated from the groups – Dr. Huang.

“You should have some of our meat, we brought enough for all of us.” Qing Shui politely invited Dr. Huang to join as he noticed she was excluded.

“Pretentious.” Dr. Huang glanced at Qing Shui but she was not at all interested – she still resented Qing Shui, the person who forced her to join this journey.

“You are a doctor, so you should be more aware than me of the consequence of lacking water and food after tramping for hours in this hot weather.”

As Qing Shui talked, he ripped a small piece of frog meat and wrapped it with leaves, and placed a cup of water in front of her.

Qing Shui turned his head again as he finished doing so. He didn't look at her expression nor did he speak more to comfort her.

“Just eat your food... Being alive is more important than anything.” Pangzi also turned his head, but he had lost a



significant amount of weight since the start of the red fog, he was not that chubby teen anymore. His shriveled face made a smile, “We are probably not good people in your mind, but we are not as bad as you have imagined us either.”

“But, who cares about how you would see us now.” Pangzi shrugged, “Isn’t able to survive more important than anything else for now?”

The doctor didn’t expect what Pangzi just said. She was frozen in place for a moment but she then picked up the meat and water and almost swallowed the piece of meat whole.

The troop was ready to depart again as they were well rested – lost two soldiers this morning but one-third of the trip had been completed; it was an acceptable rate of death for this journey so far. The atmosphere in the troop was relatively light-hearted.

The group of 20 moved within the jungle for another hour – until someone in the front stopped.

“What happened?” As soon as one stopped after the other, few of the alarmed people held up their rifle right away – they looked at all directions, “Is something wrong?”

“Not at all, put down your firearms.” Zhao’s voice came from the front.

“Why did you pause then?” Chang didn’t see anything either, he

quickly made his way to Zhao.

He soon learned the reason why Zhao was suspicious – he saw a scene of a bright and splendid flower shrub.

The flower shrub was bright red. The color was so vibrant and saturated that it even stood out from the thick fog. It was a type of red that made the flowers look on fire.

The shrub was wide and tall, even wider than Chang was able to see. It lay on the gravel path absurdly, it planted a seed of hesitation and fear of the unknown in everyone's mind.

“The color gives goosebumps...” Qing Shui caught up with Chang, he noticed the unusual color of the flowers as Chang did.

“Do you think they are poisonous?” Zhao asked with deep worry.

“I can't tell. But considering their strange appearance, we should at least avoid them.” Qing Shui pointed at the shrub, “And you know what makes them weird? There are no other plants growing around them at all, this is not common.”

“You are right.” Chang squinted his eyes to look further, he didn't even see one grass shoot under the flower shrub. It was strange compared to elsewhere, where a great variety of plants grew on each other, and, as if they were competing, tried harder than the others to reach higher for more sunlight.

“They are definitely special in some way, otherwise they wouldn't be able to dominate this area with all other competition eliminated.” Qing Shui sighed, “My one and only advice is, regardless of their abilities, do not touch them under any circumstances.”

“Do you think they are carnivorous?” Zhao stretched his imagination to picture what nature could create in this world.

“Could be. Let's test that then.” Qing Shui took out a piece of frog meat from his backpack and threw it right in front of the flower shrub. However, the flowers didn't even move an inch, they were completely calm, they didn't have a row of teeth poke out from the stamens to reach the meat.

“They are not interested?” Zhao clenched his fist.

“Nevermind, let's pass around them.” Qing Shui didn't put down his guard even though the shrub showed absolutely no interest in protein.

“Passing around them? But we will be deviating from the original path, which is right in front of us. What if we get lost?”

“Tell me what you would choose then? That we should wade through them without considering any potential hazard?” Qing Shui was slightly annoyed.

Gazing at Qing Shui for a few seconds, Zhao again turned to the

bloody flower shrub, and he gave up eventually. “Let’s pass around them.”

Zhao took out his compass from the pocket in front of his chest, recalibrated the direction, and then asked Chang to come to the front of the troop.

“Please stay at the front when we pass around, you can look further than any of us, and with the compass, I have more confidence that we won't get lost.”

“Sure!” Chang nodded, “I don't have much experience walking through the jungle, though, I will listen to you as long as I can.”

“Let’s not stray too far from the flower shrub, just inform me as soon as possible when you see anything.”

# Chapter 62: Bloody Flowers

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“Sounds great.” Chang nodded, then he moved aside with Jing and Qing shui. Zhao quickly made a command to rest of the soldiers and then they went around the flower bush.

Although the captain was well equipped with the compass and a high powered flashlight and had Chang to walk with him, he still stayed closely to the edge of the flower bush. On one hand, he was worried about getting off track but was also concerned about the suspicious flowers. Zhao kept on coordinating their direction once in a while, the troop was slowed down significantly by this cautious adjustments.

“It is such a tremendous flower bush...if we keep our current pace, I don't think we can make it to Zhengzhou before sunset.” Chang was sweating out as he noticed how scrupulous Zhao became, “We should go faster, Captain.”

“Indeed, I didn't expect the size of the flower bush to be this tremendous.” Zhao nodded as he re-calibrated the direction, the troop accelerated again.

At the same moment, a gentle breeze blew from the bush, the soft touch of the wind was fragrant with the unknown blossom.

“How aromatic!” The pleasant scent brought excitement to the troop, someone behind Chang marveled, “I have never smelled something like this before, it is so sincere and calming like a perfectly mixed perfume. I'd say it outcompetes every flower

before the red fog, not to mention its vivid and vibrant petals. If we ever had flowers like this before, It'd be the queen among all."

"Unfortunately, the nice aroma could be deadly." Qing shui showed impatient on his face, "In any way, flower and its scent never had any artistic purposes in nature. The reason why flowers had scents before the red fog was to attract pollination, but now, this could be a trap for attracting prey."

"Moreover, a flower is just a reproductive structure of a plant. I don't see the reason why humans appraise it be such a great deal." Qing shui frowned.

"Ha ha ha." Someone behind Qing shui was apparently entertained by Qing shui's lack of taste. The troop sped up again as they became more light-hearted.

After another half hour going around the flower bush, they finally got back on to the Zheng Kai Avenue.

It was truly a relief that they didn't encounter any strangers, they thought.

"Ah-----" a heartrending cry pierced through the red fog.

It was an absurdly shrill scream as if a person's enjoyment was broken by a hard stab to the stomach, unexpectedly and painfully.

"What's wrong?" Zhao immediately turned around. The beam of

light in his hand flashed right onto the screaming soldier.

“An attacker?” The face of the soldier became hideously disfigured, the artery on his neck bloated up and his face blushed. Apparently, he was undergoing great torture. His weapon dropped and his fingers became rigid and stiff like claws. His condition worsened at a rate that everyone could notice – a gradual development of convulsions.

The company around this soldier held up their rifles vigilantly, however, no matter how hard they tried, they saw no suspicious objects in the air or on the ground.

“Will it be something similar to the dodder?” Someone shouted.

“Possibly.” Some other soldiers kept the struggling soldier down and ripped open his shirt. Although his skin had turned red, his skin was still smooth without any obvious injury or infection.

“He looks like he was poisoned.” Came a woman’s voice – It was Dr. Huang. She looked at the soldier from afar “Looks like he got Dysautonomia; excessive sweating and sialorrhea...It must be some sort of neurotoxin.”

“He was poisoned? But he didn’t eat anything!” Zhao looked up and down on the soldier, “Is it possible that he was scratched by a toxic plant?”

As he spoke, he checked the soldier’s forearm and ankle, where

he would mostly like get scratched, but he didn't even find a small cut.

“Then what caused his symptoms?”

“The flower bush, was it the fragrance?” A visible constriction of Qing shui's pupil, he seemed to realize something.

“No way... None of us had symptoms as him, how did he....” Zhao was rattling on the strangeness, and, all of a sudden, he choked and the rest of his words became muttered. His face turned red and he seemed to be suffering from extreme pain. It all happened so fast that even Chang couldn't react to the change.

Zhao lost his sanity completely as the soldier had before. His skin reddened and he sweat excessively. Veins became visible on his eyeballs, followed by a painful roar.

“It was the fragrance!” Chang immediately grabbed Jing and they ran away from the flower bush.

Some of the troop followed Chang as they realized the effect of the fragrance, they turned around and followed Chang's footsteps hastily. A few of the soldiers, who were close to and were direct subordinates of the captain attempted to pull the captain with them before they fled. But Zhao had already lost his mind, no one was capable of grabbing him. They all ran away after a few tries.

Then, something horrifying was seen beside the flower bush.



At the moment they all ran far enough from the flower bush, Zhao and the soldier rushed into the flower bush accompanied with heart-piercing roaring. As if their bodies were burned with fire painfully, they ripped off their clothes and scratched their skin as they ran. They both went through slight evolutions before as everyone else in the troop, therefore, they were strong enough to tear their uniforms into pieces of cloth. They didn't seem satisfied after ripping off their shirt, their hands kept scratching on their arms and chests.

It was hard to believe that humans were able to hurt themselves to such extent – their fingers didn't stop even when they got into their muscle. There wasn't much blood but their pain was known from their wails. As if maggots were growing in their body to cause itchiness, they continuously scraped their flesh vigorously.

Their faces were not a spot of fortune either. Their fingers dug off the skin off their faces, exposing their bones. However, as if it was a brutal spell, their fingers moved to their belly and invaded their organs... It was so painful, but they couldn't stop doing it. They struggled, they twisted and they finally teared up. Blood and flesh were splashed onto those gorgeous flowers – it made the flowers more enchanting than ever.

Chang was the first witness to this horror, he kept running until the fragrance was no longer noticeable.

“What do we do? Was everyone poisoned?” The troop re-gathered, fear was the only emotion within them.

Only Qing shui was able to maintain a relative calmness.

“Dr. Huang, how can we treat neurotoxins? ” Qing shui frowned and put his last hope onto the only doctor in the troop.

“There were numerous amount of neurotoxins as far as I knew. But this is the first time I ever encounter this type. To be honest, I don't know.” Dr. Huang covered her face with her palms. “We don't even have any medication, there is no way we can escape.”

# Chapter 63: Loss

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Just as Dr. Huang had said, the neurotoxin kicked in pretty soon. They just ended the conversation, and another 2 soldiers rampaged into the flower as if that distant fragrance was their destined fate.

“What a weird way of predation, they seduce their prey by the fragrance they produce.” Qing Shui glanced at the flower bush without showing care for those 2 soldiers. He pondered for almost half a minute, then gulped almost half the bottle of water that was tightened to his waist.

Chang followed Qing Shui as he believed there was always a reason behind what Qing Shui did. Chang also swigged down half of the bottle of water and wiped off the excess from the corner of his mouth. He took out the spare bottle of water and asked Jing to gulp as well.

The others learned up to Qing Shui, although this could be useless but no one wanted to give away the last chance of surviving. Therefore, in less than 30 seconds, they emptied all of their water supply and they all had their stomachs slightly bloated.

“Mingyi, if anyone else loses control, just knock that person out.” Qing Shui was the first to finish gulping and made a request to the strongest in the troop.

“Understood.” Mingyi nodded.

That was the last conversation in the troop. After that, it was

time for everyone wait for the judgment of death.

As everyone inhaled the poisonous fragrance, no one could be spared from this misfortune. However, they had probably prayed the most desperately in their lives, hoping they could be a lucky miss. The troop sat on the ground while waiting, hoping for survival and in terror of death.

The atmosphere was almost unbearably depressed; the sound of heavy breathing was so clear among the troop that it sounded like a piteous cry for mercy.

Another minute later, a poor man went frantic just as the previous two, but he got knocked out by Mingyi before he began to suffer. Even though this man had lost consciousness, he was still twitching tortuously, the symptoms were not relieved at all. At this moment, Mingyi's fist had offered the utmost help, the rest just waited silently without concerning others.

As time passed, the poison caught onto everybody one by one, but the severity seemed to be negatively correlated with how strong they are as an EM. The ordinary soldiers were the first batch that was seized by the neurotoxin. Then there was Dr. Huang, Jing and others, who happened to be lower level EMs. As for Chang and Mingyi, they were the last two to know what the odd symptoms felt like.

Lying on the grass, Chang didn't lose his mind as the others did. He was fully conscious, but his body was under great torment.

It was a kind of extreme torture.

Chang never understood the concept of neurotoxins before, but at this moment he was fully aware how the toxin made every single strand of his nerves burn. It was a whole new level of suffering compare to physical injury, and even the acid burn was incomparable to this. The neurotoxin directly acted on his nerves, making Chang, a person with a strong mind, hope for death eagerly so the pain could be taken away.

But it was merely a thought, his remaining consciousness refrained him from scratching into his own skin. His fingers deeply buried in soil, Chang was just slowly waiting for time to pass...

Seconds by seconds, the minutes dragged on like years. As if time had stopped for him, he lost his sight and the tinnitus took away his ability to estimate time. It was unknown how long ago the neurotoxin kicked in, maybe it had been a few hours, maybe it had been a few days already. The sharp burning pain suddenly disappeared as if it had evaporated.

The suffering came and left swiftly, from relief to complete disappearance, it was only lasted less than a minute. Every sense of his body returned, and it almost gave him the illusion that the tragicness never existed.

Sitting up, the first person Chang saw was Mingyi – it was clear that the strongest recovered the soonest.

“There you are!” Mingyi smiled bitterly.

“Hey.” Chang knocked his head a few times to make sure the effect of the neurotoxin went away. He placed his palm on his forehead “What about the others?”

“...” Mingyi shook his head and pointed to the other side, “They are...”

Mingyi’s expression gave Chang a bad feeling. Sure enough, it was blood smeared behind him, almost everyone was still twitching.

There were about 15 people lying on the ground now – apparently, the others were awoken by the pain from the swoon and had become fertilizer for the flower bush. The conditions of the remaining people were no better than the missing ones, with long scratches all over their arms as they still stuck in the neurotoxin.

As if Chang realized something, he quickly tore long pieces of cloth from his shirt to tied up Jing and Pangzi’s hand respectively. However, when he looked over to Qing Shui, his condition had frightened Chang that he was almost traumatized.

Every inch of Qing Shui's skin was intact, he even maintained a clear mind.

Although he was immobile at this time, his eyes told Chang that

he was the only witness of this whole misery.

“How early did you regain your consciousness before me?” Busy with tying up his friends’ hands, Chang asked Mingyi, who was also tying up others.

“10 seconds, perhaps. In fact, the neurotoxin only lasted for 7 or 8 minutes.” Mingyi pointed at those scarred soldiers “Otherwise we could have been gnawed by other animals, smell this bloody scent!”

“To be honest, we are lucky enough that we weren’t fought out by other beasts...” Exclaimed Mingyi.

“You are right.” Chang agreed upon “I just didn’t know it was such a short time, I thought it had been at least 3 or 4 hours.”

“I thought exactly the same when I woke up, but my watch won’t lie to me.” Mingyi waved the watch on his wrist. “We weren’t delayed for long, we can still make it to Zhengzhou before sunset.”

“But... look at them, we went around this giant flower bush and that cost us quite amount of time already, not to mention they are injured now. I doubt we could ever make it to Zhengzhou.” Chang was obviously discouraged, he counted the number of people lying on the ground and said, “There are only 13 left and almost none of them are intact. And the smell of blood, I can’t even think of a way to cover this. We are doomed, seriously.”

“The smell... we have become numbers of lights in this dark jungle to those sensitive hunters.” Mingyi sighed as he spoke softly as if he had foreseen the endless attack from unknown beasts that were lurking in this jungle.



## Chapter 64: He Left

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As they were in deep concern about their trip, another person recovered from the seizure. It was Qing shui.

Although he didn't lose his consciousness the whole time, every strand of his muscle, including his tongue, went into spasm completely. Therefore, he wasn't able to move or speak. The first thing he did as he sat up was to massage his arms and legs to relieve the soreness in his muscles. He turned to Chang and Ming Yi, "We don't have to be pessimistic about this. After all, this is what we have known and expected to happen."

"How are you feeling?" Chang lent his hand to Qing shui and stood up with his help "Do you still feel any sequelae?"

"Can't tell at this moment. It was just the seizure that consumed a large amount of my energy, otherwise, I am fine." Qing shui forced a bitter smile, "But the neurotoxin hurt so much."

"And you are probably experiencing more pain than I am, because you were totally aware of the process, and that kept every bit of your sensation suffering." Chang was conscious about Qing shui's condition. He was different than the rest. Although it really was a torment, losing their consciousness helped them endure the suffering.

"What about them?" Qing shui noticed Pangzi and Jing. "Are they okay?"

“Not too bad, they weren’t the worst.” Chang moved over to check the scratch mark on Jing’s forearm, “We still have disinfectants in our backpacks, don't we? I’ll just disinfect their cuts and scratches first.”

“Yes we do, it is in my backpack.” Qing shui found his backpack buried under a dead man. He pulled out the blood covered backpack, took out the iodine and handed it to Chang. They rinsed their cuts with the solution. Ming Yi mimicked Chang and Qing shui, as he did the same to the rest of the troop.

Sadly, Qing shui, Chang, and Ming Yi found out that another men had passed away due to excessive loss of blood. They accidentally broke the artery in their thighs. Within minutes, they died by losing too much blood.

“Another 2 are dead. There are only 11 of us now.” Ming Yi shook his head helplessly.

In this silent atmosphere of death, the three sat together speechlessly to wait for the others. A few minutes after, Jing and Dr. Huang regained consciousness. Then there were Pangzi and the other soldiers. They woke up to the bloody scene around them and sunk into a long silence.

The morale of the troop dropped to the bottom. The only thought they had was... "Will we ever get out from here?"

“Hey, cheer up, we should be glad that we are still alive!” Qing shui said. He usually wouldn't say words of encouragement, “We

should keep going now, or do you want to mourn for half an hour and take another 30 minutes to pick up for yourselves? Do you think we can get to Zhengzhou before sunset if we do so? Stop acting like losers, all of you, stand up!”

The problem of dying was real and serious, the soldiers lifted their eyelids. After all, the bloody reality was what they had to deal with now, otherwise, something bloodier would be chasing after them. If they can't make it Zhengzhou before sunset, they would die. Even if they were to leave now, the time was still short. At the moment, every minute they lose now could be a chance they lose to survive.

Considering all the factors, the soldiers picked themselves up pretty quickly. Reality forced them to repress their sadness. Although they felt hopeless, the cruel reality forced them to rearm themselves. For the sake of surviving, they quickly stood in order.

“Dr. Huang, can you do some simple hemostatic treatment for them? We are leaving soon.”

“Will do.” For the first time, Huang agreed with Qing shui. While Dr. Huang was treating those soldiers, Qing shui asked Ming Yi, “Ming Yi, are there any compasses left in the troop?”

“There was only one....it was with the captain. We thought we would only need one as we can get to Zhengzhou by walking along Zheng Kai Avenue... so we didn't prepare a spare, we...” Ming Yi mumbled, but he raised his voice suddenly “The captain! The compass was with the captain! But he is in the flower bush now...”

It was another strike on everyone's broken hearts.

"For god's sake!" Pangzi sounded desperate "What do we do now? We can't see very far and we don't have any guide for direction either. It can be possible that we can get around this flower bush without getting lost."

"Calm down everybody, take care of your injuries for now, I am going to get the compass." Qing shui pulled at Chang's sleeve, "Come with me."

"What do you want?" Chang glanced at the flower bush fearfully, "We are sending ourselves to the evil! Do you understand that?"

"It may be the other way around." Qing shui removed the shirt from a dead soldier, "I figure the fragrance came from the pollen, if we could somehow isolate ourselves from the pollen and cover our nose with a damp cloth, then possibly we could prevent the neurotoxin from getting into our system. We are safe as long as we don't breath in too much of the pollen. However, if we don't have the compass, we all have to die in here."

Qing shui quickly slid into that soldier's uniform then he put on an additional layer of the uniform. They tore off two long pieces of cloth from a dead man's t-shirt, then soaked them with blood. They covered their lower face with the cloth.

Minutes after that, they wrapped themselves with heavy protection. The troop had mixed feeling about their departure,

fear and hope filled their heart. Qing shui and Chang went back to the gorgeous and deadly flower bush.

They trotted along the same path they came through and promptly stopped at the edge of the glamorousness.

“You have better eyesight than me, do you see the captain?” Qing shui was fully alarmed by the vividness and asked, “They can’t have run too far.”

“For sure.” Chang nodded. Soon enough, he spotted broken bodies in the middle of the bush.

There were broken body parts everywhere and were coated by blood thickly. Chang almost couldn't tell which one was the captain.

He carefully searched for a while and found that familiar back that he had been watching for days.

“There, that seems like the captain.” Chang pointed somewhere in the air.

“There?” Qing shui squinted his eyes to try to see where Chang pointed at. He obviously couldn’t see anything beyond 3 meters, but he was looking for an estimated direction.

“Yes.”

“Alright, stay here, I’ll get the compass.”

“What are you talking about? You are entering the flower bush?” Chang was confused. “The flower could possible attack in different ways, aren’t you afraid of that?”

“Of course I am.” Qing shui patted Chang’s shoulder, “But I can’t let you risk your life every time.”

That was the last sentence he said to Chang before he left. Qing shui turned away and stepped into the gorgeousness without looking back.

# Chapter 65: Food Web

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The soil was soft and moist. When Qing shui stepped into the flower bush, Chang noticed the sound of Qing shui's shoe slightly sinking into the soil. The sound was light, but it suffocated Chang as if a pillow was pressed firmly on his face.

His palm was sweating and he clenched his fist, Chang didn't even dare to blink, he paid all of his attention to the surroundings of Qing shui.

It was only the first step, but those flowers became vigilant to the stranger immediately. Then, creepily, they turned their "face" altogether, as if there were pairs of eyes in the center of the flowers. They were facing Qing shui now.

"It moves, like I thought!" Chang almost lost control, he wanted to drag Qing shui back before things escalated. But Qing shui only waved to him, indicating that he was fine. "Don't worry, just stay there."

The waving convinced Chang and he sat back knowing the person who he trusted well.

After making sure Chang wouldn't interrupt, he took another step and cautiously avoided most of the small plants around the flowers.

Even though Qing shui paid full attention to avoid having to have contact with the plants, the vividness sensed his existence. The

flowers turned their faces one by one as if they were bystanders of a fight. They looked at Qing shui in a circle, although they were only at Qing shui's waist height.

Chang almost had a heart attack from the strangeness. He couldn't wait to shout out to ask Qing shui to come back, but he was also afraid that these seemingly mellow flowers would turn into killing machines if he ever spoke. It was a double dilemma to Chang, he struggled to decide if he should follow Qing shui or ask him to come back.

Qing shui, as the person stayed within the circle, was even more nervous of the unforeseeable unknown. The evolution of his intelligence didn't dull his emotions. As a normal human, he knew the bitter taste of fear.

However, he had also become a smarter human these past days. He realized he needed to suppress his feelings more in this situation.

Qing shui took a deep breath to stabilize the tremor of fear over his body, and he again took a third step further in the flower bush...

Then there was the fourth...

As if he was the Sun and those were just normal sunflowers, every movement he made was followed by the sensitive readjustment from the flowers. Qing shui escalated his pace as he went further into the flower bush.



To Chang, Qing shui was a fearless champion that walked into the abyss of fear without hesitation. His clenched fist couldn't stop trembling. He couldn't dare imagine that the person he knew could be sliced into pieces by the whirling petals. He also couldn't take the heartbreaking moment that the face he knew would become mummified.

Therefore, Chang closed and opened his eyes, again and again. He wanted to make sure Qing shui was safe but also wanted to flee since he would never be able to handle Qing shui's death. As he thought internally, Qing shui had found the captain's body. It really was a mercy that the lush flower bush didn't give him too much of a hard time on finding the compass. About 10 seconds after, Chang knew Qing shui had found the compass when he stood up.

The familiar man tucked his right hand in his sleeve and picked up the compass that fell in the flower bush, and then started to make his way back.

Step by step, Qing shui was even more cautious than when he went in. Of course, the flowers watched him all the way back too.

The last step Qing shui took to get out of the flower bush was a relief for both of them. Qing shui kneeled as he had used up all his strength. All his emotions finally had a channel to break out.

"I never want to do this again." Qing shui's fingers fumbled over the compass. The blood cloth dried half way when he got into the

flower bush, but it was re-damped by the cold sweat and tears in this moment. Perhaps this was the time he cried hardest in his life. He took several large inhales to try to calm his mind.

“Let’s get back.” Chang took Qing shui's arm and placed it around his neck to help him to stand up.

“Wait.” Qing shui didn’t want to wipe off his tears because his hands might have had contact with the pollen when he was in the bush. He shook his head instead as if he could shake off the emotional side of him in this way. “We still have one more thing to do.”

“What? We have had the compass already, let’s move.”

“Let’s get his high powered flashlight too, I remembered he dropped it beside the flower bush.” Qing shui let down his arm from Chang’s shoulder and returned to the place where the blood first splashed. He moved forward on his knees. Apparently, he had not recovered from the terror. A minute after, his fingers felt the flashlight, but it seemed to have stopped working. Qing shui sighed and fixed the flashlight using the most primitive but perhaps the easiest way. He pounded it on the ground twice and the light went back on within 3 seconds.

He turned off the flashlight and hung it on his belt. Qing shui walked again to the edge of the flower bush as if he was possessed.

“What are you doing?” Chang squatted beside him and frowned. His heart almost stopped when he saw what Qing shui had just

done: Qing shui ripped off 2 flowers in a flash of light. There were a handful of petals in his hands now.

“Are you kidding me?!”

“Don't worry, it has no teeth so it doesn't bite.” Qing shui showed the petals to Chang calmly, convincing Chang that those bloody flowers were danger free. He then carefully placed them into an iron box that he hid in his pocket. Obviously, it wasn't a spontaneous decision. He prepared all this when he changed his clothes.

“You are nuts! How can it be possible that those monster flowers eat you!?” Chang forced Qing shui to leave with him. He needed to stop Qing shui's crazy act.

“They didn't because they have not yet evolved far enough.” Qing shui chuckled “As I thought, they only gain the sensory system at this time, but mouth pieces and digesting system are still far off reach for them.”

“It was pure luck! If we were a few days later, they could have jumped up and digested you somehow.” Chang's brows still knotted together as he couldn't understand why Qing shui just did that. “I just don't get why you are taking a meaningless risk.”

“Was it meaningless? I don't do things meaninglessly.” Qing shui secured the box and got his arm out from Chang's hand. “I am studying this newborn ecosystem.”

“But we almost died! Why do you still have the spare attention to study all this?” Chang was irritated.

“Well, I am making hay while the sun shines. Who knows what will happen in the future? Humans are no better than other species until they know forethought.”

“But aren’t you planning too far ahead?” Chang said, “After all, we are still stuck in the middle of nowhere. If we were still in the base, I understand why you would do it, because that’s you.”

“No no no, don't get me wrong. I am not a great person that is concerned about the future of humanity. I am merely thinking about what will happen tomorrow. Chang, where do you think we will go to when we get to Zhengzhou?”

“The research institute that they have been talking about.”

“You are right. My second question for you is, why do you think I am able to survive in that so-called institute? Let me put it in a different way. If I am merely a human with higher intelligence without matching scientific value, will I be treated as a lab rat could potentially be sliced into pieces for studying?”

“So...” Chang’s brows untied, he began to understand Qing shui's intention.

“Therefore, I wanted to know more and research more before I get there. In this way, they will know I am far beyond a lab rat.”

Qing shui explained as he walked, “Even if the politics there is better than I thought, I need to demonstrate my skills and value so that I can seek greater benefit for us.”

“I see what you mean.” Chang understood thoroughly, “You found anything yet?”

“Yes, but they are only parts and pieces. Based on what I have seen and known these days, I have come up with a theory of this new ecosystem. And of course, never underestimate the power of theory, it is fundamental. I believe this will be a great help for research.”

“Well... can you tell me something about your theory?”

“Just keep in mind that my reasoning is not perfect as I only reasoned this newborn food chain.” Qing shui smiled as he talked about his theory, “I call it the preliminary theory of food web.”

“Food web?”

“Exactly, I said preliminary because it is yet to be completed, but let me explain.” Qing shui said. “You still remember the food chain we talked about back in the days right?”

“Of course. It starts with producer, then predator, and then decomposer.” Chang answered.

“The whole of nature was linked altogether in a hierarchy.” Qing

shui drew a circle in the sky with his finger “But now, can you see the traces of the food chain? At least, I am lost.”

“It seems....” Chang looked at varieties of plants in front of him, “It seems like it is gone.”

“Like I said, after the red fog, the original food chain in the biological system collapsed. Plants are producers, but they are also predators now. Who says frogs must be preyed upon by bigger animals like snakes? Even mosquitos are carnivores.” Qing shui explained what he had seen in these days.

Chang took a few minutes to take in the information and shook his head “You are right. All these species no longer act like what we used to know. Graminivores prey on animals now and the carnivores that I knew... They seemed okay with grass too. Not to mention trees and plants, we have to keep an eye on them.”

“As you said, the newborn system is no longer a hierarchic structure, it has become a web, a complicated one. It blurred out the three roles in the food chain that we know.”

“The concept of producers and predators got mixed up, giving us trees that prey on animals. However, what is more astonishing to me is that they don't lose the ability to utilize the chemical energy of getting nutrients from the soil. When the line between graminivore and carnivore blurs, everything is transforming into an omnivore. It even eliminates the idea of the apex predator, as long as they are in bigger size, rats can prey on cats, and sadly, cats can prey on humans too.”

“The ecosystem I have known so far is a chaotic fight for resources.”

“Chaotic fight...” Chang looked around as if he just witnessed blood gushing from the sky from a deadly fight.

Qing shui paused for a second, as he added, “Let's talk about the flower. I didn't pick them for research purposes only.”

“What if we were lucky enough to get to Zhengzhou and we need to have some sort of weapon that can protect us. As long as there are humans, arguments and fighting are inevitable. To be honest, I have been thinking about this for the whole time. If we had these flowers when you killed that family, it would have been easier for not only you but also us too.”

Qing shui's word was like an alarming bell, it woke Chang up from thinking about the food web. His astounded eyes only captured the last bit of Qing shui's wicked smile.

# Chapter 66: The Most Important Person

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"Seems like I have gotten a preview of the death of our future enemy." Chang stared at Qing shui, "No wonder my parents always told me don't provoke someone that is smart..."

"Come on, I am no conspirator. I only do this for survival; there is never too many ways to protect ourselves." Qing shui lightly pressed the iron box in his pocket, asked "How far are they?"

"We are getting there; it isn't too far."

"Let's take off the outer layer, there is too much pollen on it."

"I agree." Chang and Qing shui stopped and peeled down the uniform with caution.

"Do you think we can get to Zheng zhou today?" As Chang was removing the cloth, he asked "I am just thinking of the theory of Food Web that you just told me, the aggressiveness of every species around us is on a whole new level that we didn't foresee."

"You are right, especially those are evolving to bigger size, they need to obtain tremendous amount of nutrient; and the best and the most convenient way to do so is to predate others. Therefore... we should at least expect the rest of the journey is going to be tougher than before."

"Regardless its toughness, we will endure it like we always did."



Chang took off the outer layer of pants, then he followed Qing shui to rejoin the troop.

"Did you find the compass?" One of the soldiers noticed their return and shouted with rejoice.

"Here it is." Qing shui took the compass out from his pocket and waved to the troop. He immediately looked for Dr. Huang and asked "How is everyone?"

"There are 2 serious injured persons, but the rest are fine." Dr.Huang pointed at a wounded soldier, as well as Jing.

"How is Jing?" Chang carefully hunkered down to Jing and gently stroked on her forehead. He had a bad feeling that Jing had hurt herself severely before he left with Qing shui. Otherwise, she would have been following him around.

"Well... She is too young, even she had similar condition to others, she just got worse faster than others."

"Chang..." Jing tried to mumble with her pale lips but only one word slipped through.

"Don't worried about me. Stay still and avoid talking, you just lost quite amount of blood, you'll get better when you wake up." Chang touched Jing's hair and smiled grudgingly.

"I..." She still replied to him with one word. Apparently, she had

been fighting to keep awake, but her will consumed all her strength in weakness. Therefore, after ensuring Chang's safety, she fell into deep coma for excessive blood loss.

"Ah..." Chang again emitted a long sigh – Without Jing's ability, the road ahead was more difficult.

Unusually, Qing shui groaned with frustration. He looked aside, said "Ming Yi, can you carry the other guy?" He referred to the soldier that had become immobile.

"Of course." Ming Yi took the order, he pulled up the soldier and dragged him onto his back with ease.

"Alright, we are all well rested, I assume. Let's move! We can't afford any delays, so throw away things that you don't need. Now, stay in line!" Qing shui naturally became the leader of the troop after Zhao passed away. "Chang, stay with Ming Yi at the front, and Pangzi, please carry Jing with you. Everyone else, pick up your rifle and we are leaving, now!"

"Roger that!" The size of the troop was significantly reduced, they tightly followed Qing shui as how they followed Zhao before.

This time, they abandoned most of their backpacks and they had drunk up their water. Although everyone was injured in different extent, they didn't slow down at all.

"Getting to Zheng zhou before sunset...it sounds impossible for

me if we can't speed up." Qing shui recalibrated the compass with his brows knotted "And this is under the assumption that we don't run into trouble..."

"Ah!!" Qing shui's voice was cut off by a scream from the back. When everyone realized what happened, that person's face had already turned pale and green. At the same time, a bug that was in size of fingernail flew out from his neck.

"He is dead." Dr. Huang went forward and pressed on the dead man's neck with 2 fingers, announced.

"Go, go, go!" Qing shui stopped the soldiers from coming forward – they only processed with few steps and they lost one already.

There were only 10 of them now.

The whole troop marched in the jungle, where it had become denser and lushier as they went further. Varieties of plants crowded together and competed for living space; some places became so narrow that the gap is as small as half a human. Therefore, Qing shui purposely appointed Ming Yi to go in the front so he could break down those thick branches with a machete. Although his posture looked extreme weird with a wounded soldier on his back.

"To be honest, if we let go of that wounded one, we could have gone faster." Chang whispered to Qing shui as he noticed Ming Yi's difficulty.

"I wish I could, but I have no power on deciding other people's life." Qing shui replied with the lowest volume of his voice, while he looked back to the other soldiers. "I can't even say this out loud; this troop won't be following us if I ever give up that person, I am not trying to say I wanted to buy people over, but that is also my bottom line. I can't leave anyone behind."

"True...Without him, they will feel unsafe for coming with us." While Chang was talking, something caused a sharp sting on his ankle. He cried out simultaneously as he fell on the back when he lost balance.

"Ah!"

"What was that?" Qing shui turned back and bowed to check if Chang was alright.

"Little bastard! It got a slice of muscle on me!" Chang clutched his ankle when he saw a dark shadow in size of fist quickly disappeared in a tree hole with his flesh, it was so swift that he didn't even see what attacked him.

"Is it serious?"

"Not too bad I guess...It didn't get my sinew though, otherwise I can't even walk." Another piece of cloth was teared off from his tattered shirt, he used that to cover and tighten the wound to prevent further bleeding. "It is too dangerous in here without Jing, I had no idea there was attacker until it bite on me!"

"With Jing, we can bypass most of the danger." Qing shui held Chang to stand up by his arm. "In this vast, borderless jungle, Ming Yi, You and I are much powerless compare to Jing. She is the most important person in the troop."

## Chapter 67: Warnings From The Voles

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“You are right...those beasts don’t care what are you as long as you seem edible. We can’t do anything to defend against them if we don’t know where they are.” Chang turned around his ankle to check if he was still able to move. Luckily, it didn’t affect the ligament, it’s only pain.

His facial expression relaxed as he confirmed that the wound wouldn’t slow him down, he continued, “Ming Yi and I were the last weapons in defending the troop against the unknown species. It is such a big loss that the only person who can detect danger is now in coma...”

Chang carefully placed his toes on the ground, then his heels. He tested out the severity of the bite by walking back and forth, but the wound didn’t affect him much as he said, “Let’s go.”

“Alright.” Qing Shui put down his arm from Chang’s shoulder, “Did you see what just bit you?”

“I didn’t, it was too fast, I only saw it disappear into the tree hole.” Chang said bitterly. “I hope it is not venomous.”

The troop continued on its long journey. In the next hour, the troop finally bypassed the brilliant flower bush and returned to Zheng Kai Avenue. Of course, they didn’t get out without any mishap, but the attacks were not as deadly as they were before. The plants and animals in the jungle didn’t just act on their thirst for food, instead, they evaluated the chance of success before they

moved. Therefore, some smaller groups of animals avoided the troop when they noticed them from afar, otherwise, they'd be making suicidal attacks.

“There is a small group of voles behind us, I feel like they have been following us since we left.” Chang looked back in apprehension when the troop returned to the Zheng Kai Avenue. The scarlet eyes hidden in the jungle stressed him out.

“How many are they? Their size?” Qing Shui asked.

“Not sure, about 7 or 8. I can only see 4 or 5 of them, but there should be more” Chang stared at Qing Shui “Can't tell their size either since they are lurking. My estimation... they should be the size of a wolfhound.”

“Well then, just leave them alone. We have 10 people and are equipped with rifles. I guess the smell of blood lured them, but, for now, they don't have the guts to attack.” Qing Shui paced up, “As long as they are not calling additional ones, we are safe.”

“Are you sure? Should we just fire few warning shots?” Chang was deeply worried.

“We can. After all, there is nowhere to hide since the smell of blood on us is heavy, it might turn out fine.” Qing Shui commanded a soldier, “Fire your rifle to the bush behind us, something is stalking us.”

“Yes, sir.” The soldier placed the assault rifle against his shoulder and fired. The bullets shot out in the humid air along with the sound of rapid gunfire. A series of squeaks informed the troop that the voles were scared away.

“Good job! Let’s move now!” Qing Shui again marched with the troop steadily.

However, in less than a kilometer, Chang noticed that the familiar squeaking had come back.

“They came back again! What do we do?” Chang kept his ear open.

“Just ignore them, there is nothing we can do.” Qing Shui pursed his lips, “They are merely acting on their instincts. I understand that we as a group are a tempting lunch for them. No matter how many times we warn them, they will come back.”

“We should do something!” Chang hated the feeling of being stalked. The trip was already depressing without them, and now that these bloodthirsty yet timid animals tailed them made Chang almost freak out.

“What can we do? Are you thinking about fighting them?” Qing Shui consoled him, “Come on, even if you wanted to fight them back, they’d be long gone before you see their faces. Believe it or not, when we set off again, by that time, they will be back.”



“Ahhh! This is so annoying!” Chang clenched his fists and stopped complaining.

The troop kept trotting forward as fast as they could. For another half an hour walking with the uncomfortable squeaking, Chang felt relieved suddenly.

“They left!” Chang smiled as he noticed the squeaking faded in the air “Literally like they fled! Perhaps we just left their territory.”

“Maybe, after all, voles are territorial.” Qing Shui heaved a sigh of relief as well, but he choked in halfway “Did they leave one by one slowly or spread out all of a sudden?”

“It was all of a sudden.” Chang noticed that Qing Shui walked like he was on pins and needles, “Any problem with that?”

“It just doesn’t feel right...their response didn’t show the unwillingness of giving up food, it sounded like they were escaping in a flurry to me.” Qing Shui waved his hand in the air to stop the troop. “Do you remember the time I told you rodents have better sense of smell than dogs?”

“I do. Do you mean...” Chang held the crossbow against his shoulder and pulled the string.

“Something is coming to us!” Qing Shui shouted to the troop frantically, “Take your weapons and protect each other! Spread out

in a half circle!”

The troop reacted immediately, this well-trained squad stood close to each other side by side in semi-circle. The soldiers always took orders without hesitation.

“Mr. Li, what is in front of us?” One of the soldier shouted in the formation.

“I don’t know either, but the voles that have been stalking us just fled. This is a warning to us that there must be something unusual.” Qing Shui took the wounded person from Ming Yi’s back as he said, “I need you to be prepared. I will take care of this person, so just focus.”

“Yes, sir.” Ming Yi nodded.

“Where did they run off?” asked Qing Shui.

“Right behind us.” answered Chang

“Alright, can you look out what happened ahead of us?” Qing Shui freed one hand and patted it on Ming Yi’s shoulder, “Can you go with him?”

“Not a problem!”

“Come!” Chang delayed no more.

The crossbow was fully loaded. Chang and Ming Yi were the strongest combination of physical strength, and bolted out to the invisible road ahead. After only 50 meters, Chang heard the breeze that came with a disquieting rustle.

“Here it comes!” Chang got out of the way with Ming Yi as soon as he heard the noise. They quietly hid behind a tree, but their heartbeats raced like rapid drumbeats. The rustling got closer and closer, Chang nerved himself to look out from the behind the tree. The noise gradually became crisp and clear, a gigantic yet colorful creature made his bold entry to Chang’s world.

“Holy sh\*t! What is this?! This is so disgusting!” As soon as Chang saw it, his stomach reacted, reflecting his thoughts.

# Chapter 68: Millipede

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The appearance of the monster gave Chang goosebumps all over his body. He fought with the urge to vomit and glanced at the colourful monster.

It was an insect for sure. Its slender body and shell reminded Chang of a centipede. The difference, however, was that it had more legs, yet they were shorter. The insect looked hideous, but the shell was shiny and rich in color – an aposematic signal.

“Is this a millipede...” Chang struggled at recalling the name of this monster. Although every species was evolving, it was still too soon to produce new species. Therefore, no matter how it looked like right now, it must come from a previously known species.

“It is! It is a millipede!” The image of a tiny millipede overlapped with the image of the gigantic creature in Chang’s mind, and he realized that they are almost identical.

“Is it coming?” Crouching behind the tree, Ming Yi whispered to Chang.

“It’s almost here! Run!! It’s fast!” Chang pulled up Ming Yi and they sprinted back.

“What is that?”

“An insect that looks like a snake and as wide as a wine barrel. I

only know it was wide, but I assume it is long too” They ran extremely fast, and within a few words they got back to the troop.

“What is it?” Qing Shui knew that there must be something unexpected when he saw Chang rush back.

“An insect, millipede, wide as a barrel, about 35 meters in length, seemed poisonous from its colors.” Chang answered with the key features he observed.

“How fast is it? Any chance we can avoid it?”

“I don’t know, it wasn’t at its full speed, but it definitely moves faster than any of us.” Chang looked back in a rush, the shadow had showed its huge head from the red fog.

“We can’t run away from it, here it is!” He shouted out loud and squeezed into the center of the troop.

“There! Over there, fire!” Chang straightened his index finger, pointing at where the millipede was coming.

“Fire! Fire!” Qing Shui screamed “Its acidic secretion may blind you, stay away from it!”

Most of the soldiers had never known what a millipede was, nor did have they seen the shadow 10 meters away from them. It was an inherent instinct that they wanted to avoid such a creature.

FRRRRRRRRRAK!!!

Four soldiers shot their assault rifles at the same time. The bullets tore through space and the air shattered. They bolted out as if it was their fated mission.

Although they weren't far away from the monster, most of the bullets were off target.

Their accuracy was low because even if it were a sharpshooter, without seeing the target it was impossible to hit.

Fortunately, the assault rifles had a decent rate of firing, one or two bullets completed their mission and collided against the millipede's body.

Bang!

The hit was crisp and sharp, as if metal had hit metal. The two bullets struggled to penetrate the monster's armor, causing negligible damage.

Creak!

The insect noticed that something had ambushed it, and a stream of yellow slurry spurt flew out from its secretion gland. The millipede bounced up like a basketball, and disguised itself within

the trees.

Chang lost track of the monster even though he had been trying to keep up with it.

“Damn it!”

Within this lushness of the jungle, the sky was cut off by the curtain of countless leaves and vines long ago. The greenery made up a brand-new dome for this jungle, in which it was impossible to find something hidden.

“It hid on the trees, be wary above your heads!” Chang was the eyes for the whole troop, he coordinated the troop and said, “I remember you brought some heavy firearms, It’s their time to shine. The rifles seemed useless to fight it.”

“We have a few grenades and a single-use rocket launcher.” A soldier threw away his rifle and equipped with the rocket launcher “I don’t whether this is going to hit, I have never used this before!”

The soldier was almost in tears. He looked up to search for his target, but he barely saw anything except for the leaves that almost got onto his face. His vision was greatly limited.

“There are too many trees here...shi\*t! I can’t see either, be quiet. Be careful to any movement from above us.” Chang held the crossbow and was ready to shoot anytime. He hoped to spot that color-bright creature from the mixed greenery and to capture the

sound of the slightest movement.

But this time was different than usual, his sensitive sense of smell was the one that warned him.

“A strange smell! Spread out! Spread out!” Chang’s nose captured a pungent smell that wafted around. He pulled Pangzi immediately away from that area.

The rest were one step slower to dodge.

When the last person jumped back, a strange mist-like liquid doused the clearing between the trees. It coated the grass on the ground, turning them pink.

Chang finally spotted that garish insect in between a narrow gap of trees.

“There!” He almost roared when he pulled the trigger and the bolt penetrated its armor accurately.

Creak!

The massive insect twisted on the tree, emitting a nauseous shriek.

The shriek was the perfect guide for these soldiers, and a number of rifles fired at the same time the crying soldier shot the rocket



launcher.

As if thunder rumbled through the sky, the explosion caused a burst of tinnitus and dizziness for the troop. As the explosion was too close to where they were, a wave of fire accompanied with amplified sound and air waves that blew away their formation made some fall hard on their backs.

“What the hell!” Chang spit out a mouthful of sand and soil and drew out three pieces of rocket shrapnel that were inserted on his chest.

“Couldn’t you just tell us before you fired?” Another soldier rolled up from the ground angrily. It looked like he was burned all over his chest, but the rage made him forget his pain.

“I didn’t know it was so close to us, I couldn’t see anything!” The crying soldier sobbed, he threw away the rocket launcher and stood up. “That thing is dead, isn’t it?”

“It should be.” The flame danced on the branches and vines after the explosion, Chang carefully searched for parts of the millipede in the black smoke and the fire.

# Chapter 69: Under The Umbrella Of The Odor

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Chang looked around in the ruin for a while, and found the half of the millipede that was charred. The power of the missile blew up its hard shell and separated it into two parts. The fire extinguished most of its bodily fluids, making the remaining more viscous.

“It seems like it was killed, but I don’t want to confirm whether it is dead or not.” Chang stared at the corpse that hung onto the tree.

Qing Shui rolled up and wiped off the nosebleed, “Fortunately, there weren’t too many pieces of shrapnel that got blown to where I was, otherwise, I would have died.”

“Good for you...but that man had bad luck.”

One soldier pointed at the wounded soldier who was carried by Qing Shui before the explosion – the shower of shrapnel killed him.

His death reminded Chang of Jing. He immediately turned around, but only saw Pangzi lying on his stomach.

His back was bruised and lacerated from the shockwave of the missile, and half of his hair on the back of his head was burnt. He seemed like he was right under the center of the explosion. What was even worse was that Jing was nowhere to be found.

“Pangzi, Pangzi!...” Chang pushed Pangzi fretfully, as he asked with great concern “Can you hear me? Where is Jing?”

“Ah...” Pangzi was awoken by Chang and was barely able to lift his eyelids. He took a while to digest what had happened in the last few minutes, and he revealed what he had been covering– Jing. “She is fine, but I feel like I am gonna die.”

Pangzi sat up and stretched his hands to touch the back of his head and lightly touched his skin “I probably got a concussion from the shock. My head keeps buzzing. Oh and the tinnitus! Ah! If the missile exploded even one meter closer to us, I am not sure if the monster would get blown up or not, but I am positive that none of us could have endured that explosion.”

“I am sorry... I didn’t know we were so close to the target...” Realizing the missile caused irreversible damage to everyone, the soldier apologized to the troop.

“Don’t worried, be glad that your missile eliminated that millipede, otherwise we would have died in a different way.” Ming Yi comforted that soldier with a light laugh. Apparently, his skin was so solid that only 2 or 3 pieces of shrapnel sliced his body, and there was almost no visible wound.

“I wish I had your body!” Pangzi smacked Ming Yi’s chest, “we should have asked to fight it one on one, so that we don’t need to be in such a tight spot.”

“Come on, I can be easily killed by it.” Ming Yi joked back.

However, the troop strived through the disaster, and without further delay, they set off again to Zhengzhou.

Now there were only 9 people left.

Almost everyone teetered forward, as they didn't know if they were the ones to die next. The fear and insecurity haunted them, but the hope of getting saved in Zhengzhou kept them alive.

“Don't worry everyone, it wasn't a bad thing that we ran into that millipede.” Qing Shui tried to encourage the troop lightheartedly.

“Yeah, sure, it wasn't a bad thing. Without the wounded, we can even speed up.” Someone in the troop taunted. Apparently, people became more aggressive when they were in deep fear.

“I didn't mean that.” Qing Shui didn't take that person's attitude seriously, instead, he explained “I was talking about that heavy smell from the millipede, don't you think that odor should have covered the smell of blood?”

“So what?”

“Well, it is beneficial in many ways. First of all, we'd be much safer if the blood smell is not giving out our location. Secondly, that millipede looks like a top predator in this jungle, if we smell like it...” Qing Shui laughed happily “the smell has become our

umbrella.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad!” Chang sniffed the millipede’s body fluid on his cuff and said, “Should have rubbed my shirt on it haha!”

“What a joke, Chang! You know I can’t laugh too hard, it hurts my back.” Pangzi was relieved by Chang’s jest, he lightly scratched his back, hoping that it could reduce the pain on his back.

Under the protection of millipede’s smell, the nine joked and teased at each other along the way.

As the sun moved toward the horizon, they were finally close to the end of the journey – Zhengzhou.

“We are almost there! Come on!” Qing Shui calculated the remaining distance while speeding up.

The destination was right in front of them, and the troop resisted the fatigue to trot faster. The sky got darker and darker in another half an hour, the visibility dropped sharply, and while everyone paced up again, Chang heard the footsteps of Satan.

That familiar rustle sound.

It was exactly what they heard a few hours ago, Chang never forgot what it brought.

“Millipedes! There are more than 1 this time!”

“What the hell? Do they think we are one of them?” As Chang spoke, some soldiers dropped their weapons immediately and ran as fast as they could towards the end of the Zheng Kai Avenue. They could have died there if they didn’t have that rocket launcher, but now, there were a few coming altogether. The destination was so close that added onto the fear of the millipede, it made everyone choose to flee instead of fight. Every single person, including Chang, Qing Shui and Ming Yi, bolted out. Jing was held by Chang with both his arms as they bumped along the Avenue.

The gap between EMs was clearly shown.

Ming Yi, as expected, was faster than anyone in the troop. He jumped up and down like a monkey, and soon disappeared in the jungle ahead.

Chang tightly followed Ming Yi, the stronger physique and better vision allowed him to avoid obstructions in the forest in advance. Although he carried Jing with him, he wasn’t much slower than Ming Yi.

And the third in the troop turned out to be Qing Shui. He was visibly weaker than those elite soldiers, but he was far ahead of those people. As if every step he took had undergone sophisticated calculation, he precisely avoided those slippery mosses and stout vines. He always stepped on wherever was easy and safe to take the

next step. Although his vision was as normal as the others, he seemed like he had a sensor installed to tell him what and how to avoid. To be more accurate, the way he ran seemed like he had taken this route countless times, it was all natural for him.

# Chapter 70: Things Like This

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Everyone ran as fast as their legs could carry them — they all knew the consequence of being left behind.

However, even a fast runner like Chang couldn't completely get rid of rustle sound that followed him all along.

The millipedes were extremely fast. Although their stout figure could easily fool other animals to assume that they were slow and clumsy, they were actually quick in action. Chang breathed through his mouth to get as much air as he could, but the millipedes still showed their figures through the gaps in between the leaves above his head.

“Separate! We should go separately!” Even though Qing Shui wasn't as good as Chang in strength, his ability of observation alarmed him to the danger above them. He shouted as he hastened “Go in different directions! If we were to be caged by these millipedes, no one can escape then.”

“But...” Chang was about to argue, half of the body of the millipede hung down from the tree in front of him, it was almost horrified to react as the blinding secretion ejected from the sharp mouthpiece of the millipede, was directed toward Chang's face.

“F\*ck!” Chang made a 90 degree turn without hesitation, the turn brought him to the other side of the jungle.

As it was very close to Zhengzhou already, Chang was not



worried about getting lost. As long as he was heading to the direction where Zhengzhou was, he could get out of the jungle easily. He chose to run on places where the shrubs were denser and lower compare to where it was on the Zheng Kai Avenue. As soon as he noticed the rustle sound slowly disappeared, he made another 90 degree turn to get back on track.

Chang trotted through the shrubs with caution and he gradually went far away from the millipedes.

Until the rustle sound was completely gone, he sped up again toward the east where Zhengzhou was.

From west to the east, the Zheng Kai Avenue was 80 kilometers in length. He had finally reached the exit of the avenue in his heavy breathing.

The scene changed tremendously as he went away from the jungle. All the tall trees, slippery mosses, and fungi became less visible. The branches and leaves that blocked out the sky rapidly moved backward. The plants became smaller and smaller as he ran through an area where there was a mix of grass and shrubs. Running full speed for another 20 minutes, the shrubs became even more sparse. The moment he bolted out from the jungle, the world no longer seemed threatening to him. The air was clear and fresh, making him more lighthearted.

The highway and overpass were cracked as if wrinkles had grown on their surface. Ten meters away on his left-hand side was the exit of the Zheng Kai Avenue.

Chang stopped, his breaths were the loudest sound at the moment.

He walked to the exit with uncontrollable excitement, under the billboard where it said, “Welcome to Zhengzhou.” He stared at the cracked path that he could barely see in the jungle, he suddenly had a feeling that it was as if a century had passed.

The countless tribulations and hardships were about to end, the journey began from “Welcome to Kaifeng” and ended at “Welcome to Zhengzhou.” Many tortured and died on this long march, the remaining were scarred. Yet, it was only one hour away by car before the red fog.

Chang and Jing rested for two minutes, and then walked around to look for other people. Five minutes after his search, he found Ming Yi, who was also seeking to reunite with the group.

“Ming Yi!” Chang hastened to shout as he saw Ming Yi by far.

“You got out!” Ming Yi’s excitement was written all over his face. They didn’t come out together because they took a different route.

“Yes I got out...” Chang held Jing tightly, but he sat on the ground dejected, “It wasn’t easy, did you see anyone else?”

“No, it has been 10 minutes since I got out.” Ming Yi lowered his head with shame, “I feel so bad, as a soldier, I should have made

ensuring your safety my priority, but I ran away.”

“Come on, nothing should be your priority in that situation except for protecting yourself! It is already honorable to me that you even thought of that under the pressure of death.” Chang patted Ming Yi’s shoulder and forced a wry smile “Don’t think about it, we’ll let Qing Shui take care of the duty of thinking, we just need to run for our lives. Let’s look for others for now.”

“It is difficult because everyone spread out. Hopefully they were all on the same direction to here, if so, they shouldn’t be far away.”

“Alright.” Ming Yi nodded, “We’ll go separately and we’ll meet under this billboard every ten minutes, what do you think?”

“Absolutely!” Chang agreed, as he held Jing with both his arms and went to the opposite direction of Ming Yi.

Ten minutes later, he found Qing Shui, who had just ran out of the jungle. Twenty minutes after, Ming Yi brought over another soldier, and that was the last person they found in the subsequent 40 minutes.

“Is Pangzi okay? I can’t find him.” Chang returned to the billboard worried.

“I don’t know, it was chaotic in there, I couldn’t see what happened back there.” Qing Shui shook his head helplessly. Even Qing Shui cannot pay attention to everything.

“I was pretty slow, and I heard several screams from a distance, but I am not sure if Pangzi was one of them.” The survived soldier was clearly traumatized. “I didn’t dare to look back when I was in there, I couldn’t think of anything else but run, and...” His voice became lower and lower.

“I know this can be hard to hear but it is very likely that they have lost their lives in the jungle.” Ming Yi sighed heavily, “There were 27 of us when we left Kaifeng, and now, the five of us may be the only remainders. I simply don’t think they could get out.”

“It is a certain fact, we weren’t very far away from here when the millipedes came around, it has been an hour, if they can’t get out, then death is doomed to be their fate.” The soldiers voice drifted in the dim red fog “Let’s go, please, the sun is nowhere to be seen now, and it’ll only get more dangerous if we stay here, we just need to find a shelter.”

“He is right.” Ming Yi pulled Chang’s forearm, showing that he agreed with the soldier.

“I was thinking...” Chang stood still as if he was not affected by Ming Yi and the soldier’s reasoning, he looked at Qing Shui’s eyes, and spoke with consideration. “I was thinking about going back into the jungle. Although he may be dead, I just want to confirm that. What if he is still alive but just trapped?”

“I thought so too.” Qing Shui nodded and smiled.

“What? Did you just agree? This is out of my expectation!” As he saw Qing Shui agreeing on his proposal, Chang was deeply surprised. “Using your reason... you wouldn’t do anything that has no benefit at all, to be honest, my suggestion can even kill us all.”

“But things like this don’t need to be beneficial for me to act.” Qing Shui raised his fist in front of Chang, “And you thought I will let go of our friend so easily?”

“You are right.” Chang made a fist bump with Qing Shui, and smiled with trust.

# Chapter 71: Micro

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“Are you kidding me? Do you want to go back in there for real?” Ming Yi was shocked by their decision as he saw their bumping fists. “Are you crazy? It is all dark in here, and it will be even worse in the jungle. We almost got killed when the Sun was up, and what if the millipedes didn’t leave?”

“Then we’ll just run back.” Chang laughed, “I just need to make sure that he was not left behind. Although we didn’t know each other for long, we have been through rough times, I can’t and I will not abandon my friend.”

“Well, I guess everyone thinks differently. Whatever, but I just won’t go with you.” Ming Yi sighed. It was a long sigh mixed with pity and praise. “I am not scared, but I am just not obligated to go back in there with you. In fact, it is my courtesy to let you go. Our mission was to protect Mr. Li to Zhengzhou safely. Now that you are leaving, even if I get to the institute, we will still fail our mission. Who knows what our punishment is going to be? Of course the institute have no idea on what is going on here, but getting there without Mr. Li is not making me better off.”

“Therefore, it’d be a great loss for me if you go!” Ming Yi sighed again deliberately loud.

“Don’t worry, we’ll come out alive. And... could you do me a huge favor?” Chang was almost begging as he handed Jing to Ming Yi, “She is one of ours. Can you please take care of her for me? Trust me, If we get out from there safely, we’ll certainly come back to you.”

“Of course I believe in you, you can risk your lives for someone lost in the jungle without knowing if he is dead or not, you won’t abandon this one for sure.” Ming Yi took Jing who was still in coma.

“Where do we meet if you come back?”

“There.” Chang pointed at the direction of north east, spoke “If you keep going along the road, you’ll see the campus of North China University of Water Conservancy and Electric Power, do you know that school?”

“I’ve heard of it before, it isn’t that far from here.” Ming Yi nodded.

“Just go there and wait for us, it should be relatively safer in the college campus. If we come out alive, then we’ll go there immediately.” Chang lingered beside Jing, “Please, please take care of her, if we don’t come back, then she...”

Chang paused, he rephrased his words “Then...please just don’t give up on her, she is useful.”

He firmly pressed on Ming Yi’s shoulder to show his determination. He took a deep breath and looked in to Qing Shui’s eyes and asked, “Shall we?”

“Let’s go.”

The duo waved to Ming Yi saying goodbye and again they entered the jungle of fear.

Both Chang and Qing Shui walked in quick steps, and as the path gradually became covered with thick grass, the trees became taller and denser by their sides. The green world welcomed them with a taste of horror.

“It is getting too dark in here, your vision must be limited too.” Qing Shui slowed down after stepping into the lushness that they had been trying to running away from, “How far can you see now?”

“Not too far.” Chang tried hard to estimate, “6 or 7 meters maybe? It reduced half of what I can see in the morning, what about you?”

“Less than a meter!” Qing Shui spoke against Chang’s ears “I can’t even see your face if I am a few steps back!”

“No way...that’s almost blind. Chang looked at Qing Shui, “Follow me tightly.”

“I will.” Qing Shui answered.

They walked shoulder to shoulder, and returned to where they almost got trapped by the millipedes. It wasn’t too far away from the edge of the jungle here, but there was almost no trace of any of



the troop to be found; the power of nature erased the marks of the previous tragedy.

All the millipedes were gone and so was Pangzi, Dr. Huang, and the others.

The night in the jungle seemed serene.

“There is nothing left.” Chang looked around and said.

“There must be something! I bet at least one person in the troop was taken away by the millipedes, just search for clothes or backpack pieces.” Qing Shui squatted down, trying to find some clues with his poor vision.

“Okay.” Chang also squatted down, carefully searched for traces.

Five minutes after, their effort seemed to have paid off.

“There is a piece of cloth torn apart.” Chang lifted that cloth with a slim branch.

“The millipede must have eaten this person, leaving the clothes behind in this mess.” Qing Shui carefully took that piece of cloth that was soaked with blood and flesh, and he shook off the small insects that were foraging on the cloth.

“Wait, there are some messy footprints over there.” Chang

literally lying on his stomach trying to search, “They don’t look like they came from the same person, I am just not sure if there are some that belong to Pangzi.”

“Where? Let me see.” Qing Shui went closer.

“There.” Chang pointed at the messy footprints.

“Wait, there are some belong to him!” Qing Shui examined and measurements of those footprints, and he then pointed at 2 of them confidently “They are Pangzi’s for sure!”

“No way...how can you tell them apart?” Chang kept his eyes wide open in order to tell the differences between the footprints, but failed. “They seem the same to me, how do you know they are Pangzi’s?”

“It’s a natural thing for me. A difference of millimeter to me is probably as obvious as a meter difference in your eyes. And those footprints are more than one millimeters in difference, I just can’t ignore that. I can’t be wrong.” Qing Shui followed the footprints as he reasoned.

“But how? Can you even remember the size of our shoes? That’s a little creepy to me.” Chang hurried up. He found the footprints and now it was Qing Shui’s turn to tell them apart. They groped forward along the marks.

“Well, don’t you remember my ability? It falls into the cognitive

category, but more precisely, I am extremely good at information collection and memory analysis. I simply can't forget anything I've seen." Qing Shui didn't stop as he spoke, "It seems like he was in panic. He took huge steps and they are all over the place. There must've been a millipede that hunted him."

"I hope he fled..." Chang walked on the other side of the footprints, and after about 50 meters, Qing Shui no longer needed to distinguish the footprints. There was only one kind left here, and it was Pangzi's.

"He ran pretty far away from where we were." Qing Shui kept chasing after the footprints and murmured to himself, "This doesn't look right though."

"Really..." Chang was only able to say one word until his body became stiff and rigid all of a sudden. He was stuck in a weird posture floating in the air and tilted forward, as if he was a marionette. He was frozen.

"Hey, what happened?" Qing Shui became attentive immediately with a knife in his hand.

# Chapter 72 Opportunities

“Don’t come over, I seem to be stuck on something sticky.” Chang waved his arms in the air, but the great effort he made only caused a slight rebound, as if there was a set of invisible shackles, his movement was completely restricted by it.

“Okay you should stop moving.” Seeing Chang in struggle, Qing Shui picked up the high-powered flashlight that was tucked on his belt, he turned on the light to illuminate his surroundings.

“Jesus, what did I just see? It is spider silk!” In the light, Chang noticed his body was wrapped around by threads of pink spider silk. The spider silk was crystal clear and it easily became invisible in the red fog and it blended perfectly to the environment. In the darkness of the night, even human with good vision like Chang, would be unable to find their presence.

“The spider silk seemed tenacious as steel.” Qing Shui carefully approached to Chang, “The more you move, the more it will get onto you.”

“Then what do I do?”

“Don’t worried, I know how to deal with it.” Qing Shui took out a lighter from his pocket, and tore off a piece of cloth from his jacket, he wrapped the cloth around a branch, “We’ll just need to burn it.”

“Okay.” Chang was slightly relieved, he rolled his eyes from side to side to observe the surrounding. “Can you do it quicker? I feel like the vibration from my struggle has informed the weaver spider.”

“You are correct, it is coming.” Qing Shui just wrapped the branch, a dark shadow passed by swiftly in front of him, he threw the branch on the ground in hurry and clenched his knife.

“Where??” Chang struggled to turn his head, but his head had spider silk pasted all over, he can’t move at all.

“Don’t even try, you can’t see it, it is behind you!”

“Kill it! Don’t let it bite me!” Chang shook his body even harder as if that could shake off the spider from his web. “How big is it?”

“Not too big, and don’t move.” Qing Shui full concentrated on the spider that is in the size of his face; on its body, there were reds stripes alternative with whites. The spider stopped right behind Chang before making next move, It also stared at Qing Shui with its eight eyes.

A man and a spider confronted for half a second.

Then the moved in synchronization.

The spider seemed not to care much about the man that was immobile on the web, it threw itself on Qing Shui directly.

Qing Shui also moved the knife to the front of his chest.

The spider was speedy – compare to the spider, Qing Shui was much slower indeed.

If things went the way it should be, there will be 100% chance that the spider will land on Qing Shui first, and Qing Shui would lose balance from its attack, died of the venomous spider.

Perhaps it was a contingency, or it was precisely calculated by Qing Shui, his knife had not gotten to in front of his chest, it was braked by the spider – it crushed on his knife.

As if it was a bizarre yet coincidental accident, the spider swoop onto the blade.

What was even more unexplainable was the fact the spider hit itself onto its weak spot, where the head connected with its torso, it was out of protection from its harden fur.

And that was not the end – Qing Shui reacted fast enough after the spider's fail attempt, he quickly swung the knife to his side, that action sliced off the spider's head effortlessly.

The spider must had a really bad luck to encounter Qing Shui in this way, it didn't even touch an inch of skin of whom just killed it, it fell onto the grass lifelessly.

The whole process was less than a second.

“The spider is dead.” Qing Shui wiped off the body fluid of the spider using a leaf nearby, then he picked up the branch again.

“Really? That was quick.” Chang was astonished by how quickly Qing Shui handled the spider, “Was it weak?”

“I don’t know, I only knew if a species is what I can fight with, it is usually effortless to me. I can’t tell whether it is weak or not.” Qing Shui lit up the rags on the branch, making it into a small torch.

The small torch went under the spider silk, softened the spider silk around Chang’s limbs. Chang regained his power as the spider silk loosened him.

“Finally! It doesn’t feel good as a fish on the chopping board.” Chang jumped off the web, then he took over Qing Shui’s flashlight, “We need to keep it on, otherwise I can’t see the web.”

“Sure.” Qing Shui nodded “But I feel it’s a bit strange around here, we need to be more careful.”

“Of course.”

With the help from the flashlight, Chang was able to see further again. Illuminated by the warm yellow light, a cruel fact cooled down his heart – the spider web was everywhere.

The jungle ahead, as much as Chang could see, was weaved together by all kinds of spider web – large and small, thick and thin. It wasn't hard to give an estimate on how many spiders reside in here – countless.

“How dangerous did you think the spider is?” Chang was staggered by the numerous spider web. He asked Qing Shui.

“1.5 if you were to put that in danger index, it is merely my estimation though. And they seemed to be venomous.” Qing Shui gave a truthful answer.

“If there are more than 8 of them come altogether, we'd be endangered. And looking around here, I feel like there are much more.” The flashlight swept across the jungle. “But interestingly, I don't see any of them. Where are they? One spider can't weave this much webs.”

“I don't know either, but I agree with you, there can't be only one spider.” Qing Shui frowned “Where did they go?”

A sharp squeak flashed across the jungle.

Something they were familiar with; it was a roar from the millipede! The roar sounded like it came from the further end of the jungle.

It was a painful shriek though.



“This is why!! Most of the spiders are attacking the millipedes that entered their territory. Let’s take the opportunity to find Pangzi!” Qing Shui was ecstatic, he immediately pulled Chang to go with him.

“Hurry up, time does not wait for us.”

“Yes.” Chang looked down on the ground to find more footprints.

With the help from the flashlight, they dodged layers of spider webs, a familiar figure was hung above the end of the footprints.

## Chapter 72: Opportunities

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The spider was fast. Compared to the spider, Qing Shui was much slower indeed. If things had gone the normal way, there would have been a certainty that the spider would have landed on Qing Shui first. He would have then lost balance, and died to the venomous spider. Perhaps it was precisely calculated by Qing Shui when his knife had not gotten in front of his chest. Instead, the knife was halted by the spider, crushing itself on the knife.

As if it was a bizarrely coincidental accident, the spider stabbed itself onto the blade.

Even more unexplainable was the fact that the spider hit itself in its own weak spot where the head connected with its torso, out of protection from its hardened fur. Yet that was not the end, Qing Shui reacted fast enough after the spider's failed attempt to kill him, and quickly swung the knife to his side and sliced off the spider's head effortlessly.

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With the help from the flashlight, they dodged layers of spider webs, and, soon, a familiar figure hung above the end of the footprints.

# Chapter 73: Redemption

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“It’s Pangzi, those spiders hung him up on the tree!” Chang looked up with concern as he whispered to Qing Shui. “He is not moving, I can’t be sure if he is dead or not.”

“Let’s go up and check him out.”

“That’s what I thought.” Chang replied in haste. They jumped through the gaps between the spider webs carefully. The flashlight illuminated Pangzi’s face.

“Pangzi...Pangzi!” Qing Shui hailed gently, and poked Pangzi on the arm with a branch. “Are you with me? Hey!”

“Ah.....” Pangzi muttered. It was obvious that he tried to lift his eyelids, but they barely moved at all.

“He is not dead!” Chang and Qing Shui exchanged glances and saw the unexpected joy in each other’s eyes.

It really was a surprise to them. Before they found Pangzi, they had been preparing to accept the fact that he might be dead. After all, Pangzi had been lost in the jungle for almost an hour, and he had been chased by gigantic and deadly millipedes. The chance for him to survive was nearly zero.

Although he was at his last gasp, Chang and Qing Shui cheered. As long as he was still alive, they hadn’t wasted time coming on this



trip back into the jungle.

“Hurry up.” Qing Shui lit up the “torch” as he had done with Chang and slowly roasted the spider web that wrapped Pangzi. Chang pulled him out as soon as the spider web loosened.

“Hmm....” What Chang did had apparently hurt Pangzi, but the duo could only stare at the horror scene on Pangzi’s body.

Pangzi’s body looked like it came straight out of a horror movie. There were small openings all over Pangzi’s body, and to put the severity of his injuries into perspective, there were around 100 of them.

The big ones were as large as a palm while the small ones were as small as fingernails. The good news was that the openings were not fatal, but they were so closely-spaced that it could give anyone goosebumps.

It exceeded any kind of disgust that they had ever seen in their lives. In and on those openings, there were spider eggs coated with mucus. The eggs were green and the size of beans. They were buried all over Pangzi’s body, as if his only use was to provide warmth for the eggs.

“Damn, these spiders are cruel! They treated him as a hatchery, while they could have just killed him!’ Chang was awfully upset after seeing the collection of spider eggs.

“They are not human, they don’t care if it is cruel or not. They do this to survive, like us.” Qing Shui checked out Pangzi’s pulse and cuts. He then picked up a spider egg curiously and carefully observed it.

“But why would they do that?”

“For hatching and feeding their offspring I guess... If they had killed Pangzi, the body could have only been preserved for two hours before rotting. Therefore, if he is alive, the freshness can last for a few days!” Qing Shui exclaimed. “They have become much smarter now.”

“Oh please, shut up! Pangzi is our friend, and we just need to get him out first.” Chang leaned over and patted on Pangzi’s face. “Hey, can you hear me?”

“Hmm....” Pangzi mumbled weakly. He seemed to be conscious, but not able to speak.

“He is paralyzed by the venom... I am putting him on your back, Chang.” Qing Shui lifted Pangzi on his shoulder, and slid him on Chang’s back.

At the same time, a millipede shrieked as an announcement of its own death.

“We are running out of time! They are coming back.”

Chang jumped off the branches, while Pangzi and him were bathed in the light from Qing Shui's flashlight. They looked all around them at the same time as they re-coordinated. As if they had done it a million times, they ran forward without any second thoughts.

The route they chose was different from how they got in. They went by a strange place that wasn't too far away from where they found Pangzi. The area was enclosed by 3 stout trees, and was inter-connected with numerous webs. It was some sort of residence for the spiders. The space was about 50 cubic meters. There were "decorations" within the webs, and it looked like a grain reserve for the spiders.

Judging from the scale of the reserve, it had been in operation for quite a while. It stored a variety of spider food, voles, insects, birds, and a human.

A woman.

She was locked in the center of the cylinder reserve. In order to see more clearly, Chang directed the light onto her. Her fate was no different than Pangzi's. However, the condition of the eggs were different to Pangzi's. Some of them had already broken and the transparent, infant spiders the size of fingernails covered her whole body like an expensive and sophisticated couture. But the beauty of the "cloth" was violated by the brutal act of the spiders. Some were gnawing at her flesh while some had just come out from underneath her breasts and abdomen as if her skin was welcoming the spiders' newborn with a perfect feast.

Essentially, the woman trapped inside the web was covered with spiders while slowly being eaten to death. The scene looked worse than [Naraka](#) .

(ED Note: Buddhist Hell)

However, the woman was kept alive for purposely. The duo was tortured mentally by witnessing the inhumane cruelty she was suffering. Her eyes were wide open and it looked like they were going to pop out from her eye sockets. The effect of the venom seemed to be diminishing as time passed, and she couldn't do anything but stand the pain.

“We should help.” Chang noticed the woman begging him when she realized there were survivors in the jungle.

“How?” Qing Shui pulled Chang's arm, “The spider webs are too dense, we can't get in without touching the strings. And don't forget the spiders will soon be back!”

“At least we can help with the pain, even if we can't do anything else.” Chang put Pangzi down and picked up his crossbow that was tucked on his belt. The tip of the bolt was pointed right at her heart as Chang pulled the trigger.

The bolt pierced through the spider webs and penetrated her chest. The blood oozed out from the hole. The poor woman had her final wish fulfilled with this long-awaited fatal injury.

She died with gratefulness.

“We are done.” Chang put Pangzi on his back again and he no longer paid attention to the woman, and fled out of the jungle with Qing Shui.

Thanks to the spiders, which did a good job cleaning this area, they didn't encounter anything else and walked out safely.

“Let's get Jing.”

They re-entered the human world. In here, they didn't need the compass anymore as any collapsed building were the obvious signs for direction.

Three men, one unconscious.

In this dark world, they swiftly walked toward the unknown future.

# Chapter 74: The Ecology Of Zhengzhou

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North China University of Water Conservancy and Electric Power was where Chang and Ming Yi agreed to meet. It was located near to Zheng Kai Avenue and was not far away from the welcome sign where they had a brief meeting.

The trek was about to end as they trudged on the street. Although the concrete had not yet been broken through by the plants, there were cracks here and there that showed the vitality gifted by the red fog of some plants. The ever-bustling campus was now dilapidated and rusted. The plants seemed less aggressive here compared to the jungle, where they ruled.

“The gate is locked, and someone must have used the lock recently.” Qing Shui paid attention to the manmade details, opposed to how he had behaved in the jungle. “If it’s locked, that means there are human activities. It is also a sign that there might’ve been humans hiding here before Ming Yi came.”

“How do you come to that conclusion? What if the lock was placed by Ming Yi?”

“They were only a group of three, locking the gate is meaningless.” Qing Shui rubbed his chin. “Only if there are large amount of people staying in here would locking the door be effective to prevent an attack on the people. Otherwise, they can just hide anywhere convenient. It makes no sense to lock the door. Do you know what this suggests?”

“What does it suggest?” Chang shook his head with chagrin. “Just tell me the conclusion next time. I am not smart as you, and I can barely answer your questions.”

“I too was actually asking myself when I was asking you.” Qing Shui climbed the wall, and continued to talk to himself, “If there are more than 100 people living in here, it means it is easier to survive in Zhengzhou than in Kaifeng. You just can’t find a big group of people living in a school in Kaifeng. In fact, the environment is too harsh for any human to survive, except under the shelter of the military base. I am pretty sure the ecology of Zhengzhou is more beneficial to humans than to other species.”

“Well, that sounds like a good news.” Said Chang. “Rare good news.”

“Indeed.”

While they were talking, Qing Shui had climbed to the top of the wall. As he found a stable position, Chang handed over Pangzi’s body to Qing Shui so that they could go behind the wall altogether.

“I got him.” Qing Shui jumped off the wall with Pangzi on his back.

Chang’s climb looked effortless as he climbed and jumped over like a cat.

“How do we find them though?” The campus seemed empty.

Perhaps it was because it was dark, but they had found no trace of life.

“The grass! Someone walked here before, if they weren’t Ming Yi’s, then it must be someone else’s.” Qing Shui asked Chang to carry Pangzi again. He then pointed at a spot under the light as he said, “As long as we can find a human, that means we are one step closer. We just need to follow these foot tracks.”

“There is a trace? Are you sure?” Chang looked down at the grass, but he couldn’t spot any differences.

“You probably can’t tell, just follow me.”

“Hmm..” Chang caught up with Qing Shui and tried to crack a joke. “If you had such a keen ability of observation before the red fog, then I think you would have made a good private detective.”

“I don’t think so. Even if I had this ability, I would still be a teacher. I like teaching.” Qing Shui picked up the topic as he said, “But you all would never be able to cheat. I would have caught you right away. Hahahaha.”

“Uh...” Chang sunk back into silence, “I don’t know what to say about your joke...”

Qing Shui nodded expressionlessly to end the conversation and continued to be the guide.



They soon approached a building, and Chang and Qing Shui worked together to find an entrance. Not long after, they found a modified room with windows sealed by wood. The door was reinforced to resist any potential attack. It was obvious that these could have only been modified by a human.

“Here it is.” Qing Shui’s knuckles drummed on the door insistently.

“Who is that?” A voice of vigilance sneaked through the door immediately.

“We’re just passing by here. Can we stay for a night? We are looking for someone.” Qing Shui shouted.

His words caused a burst of disturbance in the room, soon after, a familiar voice asked, “Mr. Li? is that you?”

It was Ming Yi who spoke. The door was opened from the inside, as Ming Yi revealed himself from the dark.

“Chang! Mr. Li! Come on in.”

“This is our day, isn’t it?” The flashlight in Qing Shui’s hand illuminated the room.

Other than Ming Yi, there were another 7 or 8 figures lying on the ground, covered by blankets. All of them were so thin that they seemed emaciated with sallow faces. They looked like refugees in a

famine. Chang glanced at them one by one. It was easy enough to tell that they were students. The sudden arrival of the red fog probably blocked their way back home. Loneliness and fear kept them together, but it seemed like they would soon starve to death.

“How did you get in?” Although they were grasping for their last breath, their mental guards were never put down.

“Wasn’t too hard. I shared some of my food with them, and they let me in for exchange.” Ming Yi walked to the other end of the classroom to keep some distance with the students. “Of course, we had disputes and they are still unfriendly. But that shouldn’t be bothering us as we will be leaving tomorrow. Let’s not talk about them, I am just so happy to see you back. You guys did it, you rescued Pangzi!” Ming Yi smiled with joy.

“It’s true that we rescued him, but the openings on his body with the spider eggs could kill him. I don’t know how to deal with them.” Chang placed Pangzi on the table and asked, “How is Jing?”

“She is over there.” Jing lay on one of the desks. “She is better, but still in coma.”

“Good to hear that. Alright, let’s think about how we can get rid of these spider eggs.” Chang made sure Pangzi was lying comfortably. He tried to gently squeeze out some green spider eggs from Pangzi’s arm. The stickiness felt awful in his hand. Chang felt slightly desperate as he turned to Qing Shui and said, “How are we going to clean out the spider eggs? There are so many!”

# Chapter 75: Goodbye

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“I have no idea either.” Qing Shui examined all the openings on Pangzi. “The spiders have laid eggs on him one by one, which means that, at this moment, we can only do the same - clean them one after the other. It could be done faster if we had equipment but we don’t have anything on hand now.”

“But there are so many... and we don’t even have alcohol for sanitizing.” Chang gripped the edge of a table as powerlessness and hopelessness surged within him. “If we rinse the openings by water, he’ll get infected, and we can’t use our fingernails to dig them out either.”

“I guess the only thing we can do today is to clean out those that are on the surface; we’ll have to figure out how to deal with the rest tomorrow.” Qing Shui pinched a pile of spider eggs and threw them on the ground.

“Don’t throw them on the ground! What if they hatch?” the students immediately spoke out against Qing Shui.

“Don’t worry, they can’t hatch successfully without proper temperature.” Qing Shui kept working without taking the students’ concerns into mind.

There were more than a hundred of openings on Pangzi, and the size of the spider eggs were as little as red beans. It was already challenging to clean the surface. Chang and Qing Shui were very cautious, making sure that no openings were torn further. But at

the same time, they also needed to be careful that their fingers didn't touch the openings directly. All of this resulted in the task of cleaning out the spider eggs being very time consuming.

Later, Ming Yi and the other soldier joined. Together the four of them spent more than two hours to roughly clean the surface. By the end, their eyes were drooping and they were on the verge of collapsing. It had been such a long day.

The trek through the jungle had been full of danger. From the moment they stepped in, their nerves had never loosened. Countless times they barely slipped away from the sickle of death; the pressure they took on would have crushed anyone's mind before the red fog.

They had fought to come to this place, 80 kilometers away from Kai Feng, and finally upon relaxing, the last stream of strength slipped away.

"Hey bro, I am sorry, this is the best I can do today... I am just too tired now." Chang leaned against the desk. "I can't even hold my eyes open now... Are you feeling better?"

"Uh...uh..." Pangzi struggled to utter some sound. His tongue was still stiff even if his condition had improved compared to two hours ago.

"I am glad to hear that." Chang grinned feebly.

“Uh...uh...” Pangzi once again tried to say something but only his eyes talked with turbid tears.

“Man... What are you talking about?” Qing Shui teased Pangzi. “Can’t even tell what you are talking from your lip movements, so just sleep now. We’ll figure something out tomorrow, okay?”

“Tomorrow...” Like a computer running out of power, Chang fell asleep while still sitting.

Qing Shui was quick to follow Chang’s example when he sat down beside him.

The classroom was extremely comfortable compared to the places they had gone through, and the two soldiers’ heads drooped as well. They went lower and lower, then completely collapsed onto the ground.

The students gradually relaxed as they saw the four threats lose their consciousness.

The air cooled down as the time approached midnight.

Chang slept so deeply that he relaxed his guard completely. Still, at one point he became aware of some vague movement nearby. His body told him to lift his eyelids, but the drowsiness knocked him back to the dreamworld. As far as he knew, the noise he heard didn’t move closer to him, so he gave up this meaningless struggle and returned to the state of deep sleep.

He didn't wake up until the sun turned the black world to scarlet.

"Qing Shui..." The first person he noticed when he regained consciousness was his teacher, then Pangzi who was lying in a pool of blood.

"Pangzi is dead." Standing in front of the corpse, Qing Shui murmured, "It was all my fault. I didn't notice anything about him changing his mind."

"What are you talking about?" Heart sinking, Chang stood up in a haste. "He was doing good yesterday, he can't be dead!"

"It was suicide." Qing Shui stood aside to reveal the tragedy. There was a deep cut in the throat that had caused excessive blood loss. And there was a knife clenched in Pangzi's hand.

"Why? Why would he do that?" Chang was on the verge of having a mental breakdown, his hands shook uncontrollably.

"He left a letter to us." Qing Shui handed Chang a piece of blood-stained paper.

The piece of paper was ripped off a textbook. The handwritten characters were mostly squiggles; apparently, Pangzi had not recovered by the time he wrote this letter. Chang flattened the wrinkled paper and read with mixed emotions.

“Brother Chang, Mr. Li, this is my letter to you. By the time you will be reading this, I would probably have died already. I want to tell you so much but I’m no good at expressing my feelings on paper. Therefore, I think, ‘Thank you’ are the words that I want to say the most. I made this decision on my own and, please, don’t feel bad for me. To be honest, I have been thinking about leaving you guys; after all, I was always a burden along the way, taken care of and protected. Thank you. Without you, I would have died alone somewhere at the very beginning. I knew I was such a useless person but I was too afraid to be left behind at the same time.”

“I wanted to gain some sort of ability to help out but we all know it is a rare event. We can’t just have all the luck that we pray for. So, I blamed myself for being a coward.”

“The moment I saw you come back, I was in tears already; I have prepared to die when I was caught in the spider web. When I think about putting myself in your shoes, I would probably have made a different decision. Therefore, thank you, and I will never forget what you have done for me. Taking this into consideration, I am braver than before. Thus, I decided that the burden, I, must be dropped.”

“I am not sublime nor altruistic, the reason behind my decision is simple fear. When you were getting me out from the spider webs, I saw how the other victim had suffered. I don’t want to be like her; it was so painful to look at. I would rather die with a sleek slice of a knife. Please, please, don’t feel sorry for me! I know it better than anyone, I cannot be saved. Some of the eggs are in my bloodstream; the slightest itchiness constantly reminds me of how close I am to becoming her.”

“I can’t wait for the morning. In fact, there must already be spiders hatched in my body.”

“I really appreciate that you didn’t leave me behind in the jungle, but now, allow me to die in peace. It was my pleasure, to meet you, Chang and Mr. Li. I have no regrets now. Thank you.”

“By the way, brother Chang.”

“Do you remember teasing me before, saying that you’d make my finger bone into a pendant if I died? It is about the time you made it real; give me a chance to stay with you, become your lifelong brother. Please, whenever you want to give up, think of me. The least you can do is live for me.”

The paper wasn’t large enough to contain words that Pangzi wanted to tell, and at the corner of the wrinkled paper Chang found the last sentence skewed.

“Lastly... If Jing asks where I went, I beg of you, please don’t tell her I suicided. I don’t want her to be sad for me. Just tell her I found my family.”

His signature was right beside the sentence: Shiyu Li (Pangzi), September 14th, 2014.

Chang repressed his sobs. He closed his eyes but they trembled rapidly under his eyelids. The corpse had begun to perish, so he sliced off its index finger and placed it into his pocket.



“How selfish of him to commit suicide... How could he do that?”

“He didn’t want to be a burden to us.” Qing Shui was expressionless, but the corners of his eyes had become watery.

“Let’s fulfill his last wish, the cremation. He will be free from these torture filled days.”

Chang picked up Jing with one hand and dragged Pangzi with the other. He tottered out of the classroom.

Qing Shui stared at Chang’s back and silently wiped off the tear that was about to fall.

He woke Ming Yi and the other soldier.

“Wake up! We should be leaving.”

“Leaving for where?”

“The research institute.”

# Chapter 76: Department Of Biology's Genetic Engineering

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Chang dragged Pangzi's body to the street, wandering around until he found an abandoned vehicle from which he snapped a section of a tube. He then siphoned the gasoline from the gas tank and poured the liquid onto Pangzi's broken body.

While Pangzi was gradually covered by the gasoline, Qing Shui finally woke the soldiers up, and they walked out from the classroom together.

"He is dead?" asked Ming Yi, gazing at Pangzi's body and heaving a sigh.

Chang quietly asked for a lighter from Qing Shui, and a small flame was lit on the tip of the lighter. It then quickly fell onto Pangzi's body.

The raging flame melted his body and burned the alien lives lurking in him.

"Let's go," Qing Shui said, after patiently waiting until the last bit of flame transformed into a stream of dark smoke. "Fortunately, he didn't die in suffering."

"You are right, this is the last thing I could feel happy about for him." Chang turned away from the ashes of his dead friend. "Where is our next stop?"

“The research institute.” Qing Shui gazed toward the northwest. “I am really curious what human science and technology can do in this new world.”

“Where is the research institute?” asked Chang.

“There was a small village within Zhengzhou, called Xu Zhai. It was completely rebuilt seven years ago during an urban transformation project, and then they decided to use the land for the huge research institute.” Ming Yi tried hard to recall what he had heard from the captain. “It was for biology and genetic engineering. I had also heard that for the last seven years the government had built a lot of these research institutes in the suburbs. It started when they recorded the red fog for the first time. I think they must have known a lot about its secrets.”

“But they never foresaw that it would become a global phenomenon,” Qing Shui said, looking fixedly at the red sky. “Let’s see what they have in there!”

The sorrowful emotions were deeply buried and covered in Chang’s heart. He gently pinched the finger bone in his pocket before picking Jing up and putting her on his back. With Ming Yi’s guidance, they headed toward the northwest of the city.

As they went further, the change along the path became clearer. And it was quite different from what was in downtown Kaifeng.

The ecology around Xu Zhai was highly impacted by human

activities; the plants seemed sluggish, and the grass was much shorter. Mutated animals were barely seen in this area; they even saw people wandering on the street to look for food. Apparently, it was much easier to survive in here than anywhere else, and wanderers didn't seem to be worried about not having military protection.

“What a peaceful place!” Chang couldn't help but exclaim.

“It is just different from Kaifeng, though, I feel the harmony here.” Qing Shui also kept observing the surroundings and the wanderers. “But I don't know what they are living on; if they rely on the plants, malnutrition would soon become a big problem. If I were one of the researchers in the institute, I would propose the food problem as the very first thing”

“Well, you will soon become one of them,” Chang said, turning his head.

“I don't think they will listen to a newbie, though.” Qing Shui lightly shook his head. “More importantly, I don't know how many EMs they have in there.”

“You'll know that when you get there.” Chang also added, “In my opinion, I don't think there will be many like you. If everyone there was an EM like you, then I would be fearless in this apocalypse. The science and technology would soon overcome the struggle we are having now. Getting back to the top of the food chain would be easy.”

As he spoke, he noticed a human-sized cat walking toward them, but it fled at its fastest speed as soon as it felt danger. “A clever little cat, perhaps you are an EM as well?” Chang praised the cat.

“What did you just say?” asked Ming Yi. He hadn’t seen the cat but only heard Chang talking to himself.

“Nothing, just keep going.”

They were faster than yesterday as they were well-rested now. It took them only one and a half hours to cross the city of Zheng Zhou, and they finally arrived at the research institute that Ming Yi kept talking about.

The institute was enclosed by high walls, the plaque on top of the gate implying its great vitality. The place was heavily guarded by layers of armed soldiers since several military camps surrounded the building.

It took a while for Ming Yi to negotiate with the guard at the gate until the soldier finally loosened his guard and allowed him into the institute. The soldier entered with a quick and steady trot. Soon, a person came out from the red fog, accompanied by Ming Yi; the three stars on the stranger’s epaulet hinted at his rank in the military – he was a colonel.

“You must be Qing Shui Li!” The Colonel immediately came closer to Qing Shui to confirm the person he was greeting; his face was painted with ardor. “Welcome! Welcome!”

“I heard from Ming Yi that you came from Kaifeng. Are you an EM?” the forty-year-old colonel asked, while stepping forward to shake hands with Qing Shui.

“As you said, I am from Kaifeng.” Qing Shui smiled.

“You have come a long way; the journey must have been hard for you!” The colonel made a pitying expression. “Unfortunately, we have lost connection with the cities around Zheng Zhou. Otherwise, we would have sent troops to pick you up.”

“I understand the situation with the connection issues, don’t worry,” Qing Shui said, nodding politely.

“All right, make yourselves at home as we will be working together soon; don’t hesitate to ask for anything you ever need help with. But by the way... I don’t think I mentioned that I used to serve in Kaifeng when I was younger, so we are fellows from the same place! My name is Hang Xie, you can just call me Xie.” The colonel warmly introduced himself. “They are your friends, right? There weren’t many outsiders coming here before, so this is rather exciting for us!”

Lead by Xie, Chang and his company entered the institute. The inside was not as fancy and futuristic as they had imagined. It was just ordinary. But what they saw was just the offices, they didn’t know what was going on in the laboratories.

“It cost five billion to build this place, it is almost as expensive as the National Stadium in Beijing.” Xie continued on touring Qing

Shui and the company. “Surprisingly, the government was quite efficient in using the invested money; as far as I know, they have quite a lot of ongoing cutting edge research projects in biology and genetic engineering. Though, our institute is small if compared to the ones in major cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.”

“It sounds like our country has prepared for the arrival of the apocalypse from a long time ago.”

Qing Shui and the company were led into a meeting room.

Xie put a smile on his face before leaving. “Please have a seat. Dr. Chen will be meeting you in a minute, he is one of the person in charge of this institute. He has been looking forward to meeting you since he heard of you!”

“Thank you, Xie!” Qing Shui thanked him for his kindness and gazed at his retreating back.

Chang leaned on the couch and relaxed. “Seems like they value you a lot.”

Qing Shui also nodded with relief as he saw the colonel leave the room. “Their attitude assured me of their professionalism, we just need to see how they will arrange us...” He finished off the sentence with his brows knotted.

A moment after, the door was opened again. A fifty-year-old man with strangely dark hair entered the room. Chang spotted his

name tag before anyone else - “Xu Dong Chen, Biology research group.”

The clothes of this person were different from Chang’s impression of a researcher’s dress code. Instead of a white lab coat, this man wore a regimental uniform. His rank was even higher than Xie; he was a major general.

This was the highest rank that a researcher could attain in the Chinese military. Anyone ranked above major general represented not only honor, but also military power.

As Dr. Chen walked into the room, Xie quietly turned around and closed the door. “Chen, this is Qing Shui, don’t forget that I brought him to you.”

“You can count on me,” Chen said, patting Xie’s shoulder before sending him out of the room.

Chen’s eagle eyes landed on Qing Shui.

“You are Qing Shui Li?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Come with me.”

Their first conversation was very brief. Qing Shui and Chang



went out of the meeting room and travelled through the building until finally stopping in front of a room with a strange looking door.

“This is our testing room, which is equipped with instruments and ancillary apparatus. We will test how far you have gone on encephalon mutation before we talk.”

The door opened silently, and Chang carefully peeked from behind Qing Shui's back. For the first time, he sensed a taste of futuristic from the equipment that he had not seen before in his life.

“The young man with the kid, you shall wait here,” Chen spoke to Chang in a polite manner.

“No problem.”

Chang followed them with longing eyes. The door seamlessly closed without giving out any clues of what was behind it. The only bit of information he could get was the buzzing sound of the equipment and Qing Shui's calm voice when answering questions.

15 minutes later, the two came out from the room; the calmness previously seen on Chen was completely transformed into astonishment and ecstasy. Even Chang was aware of something unexpected having happened.

# Chapter 77: The Creator's Waters

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The tense lines on Chen's face loosened up as he recovered from the shock. He was a renowned scholar, after all. He quickly absorbed the information from the test result, and a straight face was soon put back on.

"Welcome, you can join my group as a researcher; mine is the third group, Gemma, in this institute, you will meet the rest when you start working in here. I will grant you access to facilities and rooms as soon as possible." Chen casually glanced over Chang and Jing in his arms "Are they your family?"

"Yes, they're my family," Qing Shui affirmed.

"Sounds good, we do offer suites for researchers who work in the institute. Therefore, your family can live with you." Chen made a pause and articulated carefully with his next words. "Now that you are part of the institute, you will be exposed to all sorts of research that we have done; although your encephalon mutation puts you at a position where you can acquire knowledge by just one glance, you are still lacking relevant knowledge. For now, it would be good for you to come to my class and run experiments as my research assistant. You would gain more knowledge as you go further in the field of Biology and Genetics."

"I'll do as you say," Qing Shui agreed with a nod.

A burst of sonorous footsteps came from the end of the corridor.

The footsteps belonged to three men: one was in a military uniform and the other two in lab coats.

The one in the middle was middle-aged. His facial features weren't outstanding, and neither was he sharp-eyed. Chang saw him coming from far but didn't pay much attention to his appearance. He was more interested in the epaulet. It signalled that the man was a Lieutenant General.

This was the top power in a secondary city like Zhengzhou.

The lab coats beside him seemed to be in high positions as well; the three walked side by side, and it was hard to tell if either one was superior to the others. What was more jaw-dropping was the fact that one of them was in his twenties, just like Qing Shui.

"Dr. Chen," the Lieutenant General greeted before he arrived. This man was not haughty. Instead, there was an affable aura surrounding him. Only the epaulet revealed his rank.

Chen forced himself to squeeze out a smile when he saw the person coming, making it obvious that he was acquainted with the Lieutenant General.

"General Zhang."

"Chen! Haven't seen you for a while. I heard from my subordinate that an EM just arrived. I just came to give my congratulations in person since we don't have many EMs coming

from outside of Zhengzhou. What category is he in?”

“Well... He is just an ordinary EM in cognitive and analytic categories, nothing too special for General to concern about.” Chen gently patted Qing Shui’s shoulder. “Here he is, a young man as you see.”

Apparently, Zhang wasn’t too impressed by Chen’s introduction. He shifted his eyes and stared at Qing Shui. “A spirited young man! Our institute needs fresh blood like you!”

“Thank you for your kind words, General,” Qing Shui answered, bowing.

“Treat us as your friends and family!” Zhang hinted for the young man at his side to come closer. “Let me introduce you, this is Zhuo Zhao. He is just as young as you are and is the only local in the institute who underwent encephalon mutation. This precious gem was the only EM in cognitive category in here before you arrived. I have learned how smart he is during his stay, so you should talk with him more.”

Following Zhang’s introduction, the young man was the first to reach out in a friendly manner. “Nice to meet you, I am Zhuo Zhao, just call me Zhuo please,” he said.

“Nice to meet you too, I am Qing Shui Li,” Qing Shui said, holding out his hand in reply. He smiled, and the two shook their hands. It looked perfectly neutral and normal, but there was an undercurrent of tension as they looked each other in the eyes,

judging, evaluating.

Not sensing anything out of the norm, Zhang stepped aside to introduce the other person. “This is Dr. Xilin Zhang, one of the best scientists in conducting research on Biology and Genetics in China; you will surely learn a lot by having him as your supervisor.”

“Nice meeting you, Dr. Zhang,” Qing Shui greeted him, polite as he always were.

“Hello, Qing Shui.”

Dr. Zhang was in his sixties, but despite his wrinkles, his dashing and upward eyebrows made him as charming as a young man. He looked neither soft nor tough and was very charismatic.

General Zhang spoke again once he ensured Dr. Zhang greeted Qing Shui. “Great, now that we know each other, if you have any questions, you can ask Dr. Zhang. And please, make sure you’ll talk to Zhuo more often.”

“General Zhang, are you trying to steal Qing Shui from me?” Chen asked, stepping in to cut off Zhang’s chattering. “Our group found him first, and he will work for me as I found him in the first place. This is the rule that you set before you found Zhuo, or did you forget about that?”

“Hahaha... Look at how nervous you’ve become.” Instead of

feeling intimidated, Zhang simply sidetracked. “I was only concerned about his welfare as he is a newcomer; I never thought about taking him anywhere. To avoid arousing suspicions, I will be leaving now.”

Zhang’s chatter was ceaseless. He patted Qing Shui on the shoulder before leaving. “Group Alpha will always welcome you to visit and study. Although our five groups share the resources equally, labor is always shared differently within divisions in socialism.”

Zhang seemed to have a mask of being amiable. His facial expressions always made others feel like he was approachable.

After finishing his speech, he turned around and slowly disappeared down the other end of the corridor with the lab coats.

“How does research relate to socialism? His speech was so weird!” Chang was lost in their conversation.

“He was trying to say his group is superior to others; and he wanted me to consider hopping to their group,” said Qing Shui, expressionlessly.

“Then what is your decision?” Chen asked, looking sideways at Qing Shui’s face.

“I am already at your side by what I’ve just said,” Qing Shui implied.

“If you don’t mind, can I ask for your reason behind the decision?”

“It was intuition that told me to do so,” Qing Shui said, gazing at Chen. “By any chance, can you tell me the number of the EM index test that you just performed on me?”

“167.”

“What about Zhuo, the young researcher?”

“134, his was slightly lower than yours.”

“Understood. He’s been here for a few days, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, eight days to be exact. He impressed me with his learning skills as he had a thorough grasp of genetic engineering which takes decades to establish. He even joined the research group which studies the red fog today.” He drew a USB key from his pocket as he spoke. “This is what he learned from; it contains more than a gigabyte of research papers. I hope you can read them in a week.”

“I really appreciate this, Dr. Chen.” Qing Shui bowed again to show gratitude.

“Let’s call it a day then. You must be tired from the arduous

travelling. I'll ask someone to arrange a suite for you and your family." Chen directed his attention to Chang and Jing "You are all wounded, and the little girl seems too pale... it must be shock from an excessive blood loss. We have military doctors stationed in the institute, I'll get one of them to take care of you guys. We'll talk more if you have any other inquiries, but for now, just rest."

Chen turned around and left to make the arrangements for Qing Shui.

The rest of the day went by quickly. The doctor that Chen asked for arrived before they got to their suite. They received proper treatment and then went to have a good rest in their beds.

At dusk, Chang woke up and saw Qing Shui buried in the blue light of the computer. The room became darker as the clock ticked by, but Qing Shui didn't turn on the light in consideration of Jing who was still asleep.

"Electricity! This makes me feel like I am back in the civilized world," Chang said. His finger hovered over the sensor of the desk lamp, the yellow light shedding warmth on Qing Shui's face. The calm atmosphere in the suite made him feel like the apocalypse had never happened.

Nailed to the desk, Qing Shui commented without turning his head, "Sad to say, civilized world is not necessarily any safer than the jungle." Every page he read stayed less than three seconds on his retina, such pace of page turning made his eyes seem like they were flickering.



“I don’t really understand the political stir in here. I thought humans would be united at this moment to fight the crisis ahead, instead of fighting with each other.” Chang slowly sunk into the sofa beside Qing Shui’s desk, sighing in comfort. “They are so smart yet so dumb at the same time.”

“Politicking doesn’t mean they are dumb, but they may just be arguing over beliefs.” Multitasking was well-handled by Qing Shui, he kept the pace of reading while talking with Chang. “To elaborate, all of us are facing the same world sunk into the red fog, but how everyone approaches it could be very different. Some might be extremists who would advocate to transform the nature using nuclear power and biochemicals, so as to defend the inherent dominance of humanity. Others might be much softer, holding an idea of immersing civilization in nature without changing it. You can’t really say which side is right or wrong, and it doesn’t mean one is more evil than the other. They are simply factions which strive for the future of humanity with different approaches.”

“Therefore, you declined the invitation from Group Alpha. Does that mean you do not agree with their ideas and approach?” Chang asked, standing up and coming to stand behind Qing Shui.

“You are correct. They are aggressive enough for me to know they are the left wing. The three of them are immersed in the fantasy of invincibility of mankind. They also view nature with contempt shown by their arrogant attitude. Their values and beliefs conflict with mine.” Qing Shui heaved a sigh, and his fingers stopped pressing on the mouse. His index finger fumbled over the screen. “Just as the person who discovered the red fog said in this comment, ‘Humanity cannot simply outcompete

nature, like humanity cannot defeat its Creator. I never believed in theology, but I do believe this magical red fog is the waters of the Creator.’”

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### Translator's Notes:

Hello,

To allow better understanding of the novel, the translator and the editor have worked together and decided to address the meaning of MCs’ Chinese names as many of you may not have a chance to see the link between MCs’ personalities and implication from their names. We hope this explanation can make your reading experience more enjoyable. ;)

Best,

Letty & Monika

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Chang Liu - Chang means fast, fluent, carefree.

Qing Shui Li - Qing Shui is his first name although it was often typed separately, it means clear and pure water. The name resembles how resilient, calm and unperturbed Qing Shui is.

Zhuo Zhao - Zhuo usually means excellent.

Jing - Jing means quiet and stable.

Ming Yi Shen - Ming Yi is his first name that typed separately. It is a kind of names that often associated with the political environment when he was borned. It fits his background if you recall that he was borned and raised in a small village, which is usually isolated from big cities like Beijing, Shanghai. The impact of Mao, the 1st Chairman of PRC isn't completely vanished in this small town and newborn babies are usually named patriotically. Therefore, Ming usually means bright, honesty, integrity and Yi can mean "be the number one" or just simply because he is the first kid in the family.

Pangzi (Shiyu Li) - Pangzi is often a nickname for those who are chubby, it is named after a person's physical appearance. It is a common practice to name after a chubby person in a Chinese novel as Pangzi as Chubbiness is their most noticeable feature. Pangzi's real name Shiyu, means rain that comes in time.

# Chapter 78: Unlimited Possibilities

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Qing Shui resumed his routine-like reading. “The material in this USB drive is not only extensive but complete; I am really impressed by how far they have gone with the research on the red fog. Look, they mentioned some countries are even able to purify the red fog.”

“Purification? What elements does the red fog have?”

“They haven’t figured it out in detail yet. Modern science has not evolved enough to identify each compound. The only thing they know is that the red fog contains an unknown number of unidentified radiations, and a variety of chemical compounds that they’ve never seen before.” Qing Shui stopped at a page where there were photographs of scientists occupied with collecting the fog and purifying it with a series of compressors and solvents in the tube.

“The American scientist who had named the red fog “The Creator’s Water” had discovered its function two years ago. Since then, there was a sharp increase in funding of genetic engineering researches. The red fog seemed to be extremely useful for life extension, genetic engineering and weapon research.”

“This is where Russia, which had successfully refined the red fog, had concentrated a year ago. It performed medical trials on animals, and then humans. At that time, they created a number of super soldiers.”

“Super soldiers?” Chang developed a strong interest out of a sudden. Although he knew nothing about genetic engineering, which seemed to be a field far out of his reach, he still displayed great curiosity toward it. This was since it was tightly related to physical modifications and had a direct benefit to him.

“They can inject the concentrate to a human body?”

Qing Shui nodded silently and scrolled down the page, where the images were replaced by a miserable scene. “Unfortunately, the concentrate malfunctioned their gene, and they died in less than a week.”

Chang became heavy-hearted as he saw the pictures, his head drooping. “So, we don’t have any chance?”

“I can’t come to that conclusion right now. Those were ordinary people who hadn’t adapted to the red fog yet. Also, it sounds to me like they had overdosed the concentrate. But you are much different compared to those deceased, especially since you are an EM altered by the red fog. Your physical strength and reflexes are ameliorated. Even ordinary people nowadays acclimate to the mysterious red fog, look here...” Qing Shui said as he kept scrolling down. The architecture in the image looked familiar to Chang. It was standard Chinese style architecture, which was highly similar to their institute.

“In fact, none of the countries stopped their research on the red fog. They even improved the purification method in these two years. You must have recognized where this picture was taken. In this paper, a research group in another Chinese research institute

made momentous progress, a lab rat had survived from the injection, and the red fog modified its gene! Even though the chance for such luck was only 0.03%.”

“That means the death rate was 99.97%... This is scary, I would never risk my life for such a rare success,” Chang said, his enthusiasm doused and the light in his eyes extinguished.

“No need to be frustrated, buddy. This is just a potential direction; I have no idea what kind of progress they have made until I join them tomorrow.” Qing Shui leaned back to release the tension on his back muscles. He rubbed his sore eyes and yawned. “I am just a newcomer to this institute, so the path is unimaginably long to what we desire. Even though this material covers bits of everything, it isn’t updated to the latest news. But keep in mind that the future is ours, and the institute is our stage. I need to read through the material and papers as soon as possible, and I hope I can finish an essay for the preliminary theory of food web in time. That way I can get attention from the top level and enter the core research.

“And you, you need to go further on the Encephalon Mutation of your category.” His bloodshot eyes disclosed his tiredness, but Qing Shui gazed at Chang with seriousness. He said, “It won’t be peaceful here. No, to be honest, this place is full of menace. When the fragile equilibrium in the institute breaks, I can guarantee you that this will end up solved by force. This is exactly when you need to turn up.”

“From your words, it sounds like I am a big deal in this political stir. However...” Chang gazed back at him and confessed without

blinking his eyes, “I just simply don’t think that a higher degree Encephalon mutation can make me bulletproof. This is most important in this institute, where military stations and guards surround the place day and night.”

“No, no, you are wrong. You have to understand that the evolution of lives is unpredictable and full of potential. Remember the Willow...”

“Are you saying that I can evolve as far as it?” Chang asked, straightening his back. He was finally seeing the light of hope.

“Possible in theory, unachievable in reality.”

Qing Shui interrupted Chang’s excitement with his tranquil tone, and added, “I didn’t mean to frustrate you. We all know that human evolution has come to a dead end. Our physiological structure is sophisticated and we are also far ahead of other species in intelligence, making the evolution for us much more difficult. I also think that this is the reason why humanity became vulnerable to the other species so quickly after the red fog apocalypse.”

“But that doesn’t mean we will be in a disadvantage forever. Indeed, humans are always one step slower in evolution. However, the capability of intervening with nature gives us the ability to slow down others’ evolution by scientific methodology. We humans have a clear division of labor. We also have a long history of uniting in front of a crisis. This is the last fight and we are not allowed to fail. Don’t worry, humanity won’t get eliminated so soon. At least not in the foreseeable future,” Qing Shui explained. His craziness slipped out through his shining eyes, as if he knew

humanity would triumph in this battle with the nature magnificently.

“Therefore, trust me! I will make you into a super life, blessed by the nature and the technology. But before that happens, I need to eradicate any obstacles in front of us.”

Chang’s chest filled with motivation.

“Never underestimate your potential; starting from tomorrow, you should start training systematically. There is much more in you that haven’t yet been revealed. Before I enter the core research, keep up the work to prepare for the genetic alteration.”

“Understood,” Chang concurred.

“Great! You should go back to sleep now, I need to read more before I’m exhausted.”

Patting Qing Shui’s shoulder, Chang turned away from the dim light and let the darkness in the room softly wrap itself around him. The bed was almost too spongy, and he fell asleep immediately after settling on it.

In the next three days, the injuries on Chang gradually reduced in size and were eventually replaced by patches of delicate pink skin. On the other side of the room, Qing Shui got attached to the computer, reading the rest of the papers day and night without rest. Jing was also improving, her breath was strong and smooth



again, when compared to her condition in the jungle.

This morning, someone knocked on the door when Chang had just gotten up and was planning his workout routine.

He opened the door with suspicion and saw Mingyi, an acquaintance who Chang had not seen for the past three days.

“Long time no see,” greeted Mingyi. In his hands was a tray with a plate of salad placed on it as well as two glasses of strange sticky juice.

“Mingyi! They changed the personnel to deliver our meals! Why you though?” Seeing his comrade made Chang feel extra light-hearted and he stepped aside to let Mingyi into the suite. “I haven’t seen you since we got here, how did you find us?”

“A long story. The superiors were happy that I sent Mr. Li here safely. They awarded me with a higher ranking. Can you even believe that they made me a captain?” Mingyi asked, while placing the tray on the coffee table. He glanced at Qing Shui, who was still robotically turning page after page with a straight face. It was as if he didn’t even notice that Mingyi came over for a visit.

“Leave him alone, he has been like that for the last three days, he can’t even hear me talking to him sometimes.” Chang was concerned that Mingyi may interrupt Qing Shui, so nervously, he repeated himself, “Please don’t mind him, I want to hear more about your story.”

“Sure. Do you remember Colonel Xie who we met when we got here? He treated me well when they heard that I am an EM with a high degree of evolution. They even asked me to train the domesticated animals that are held in this institute.” Mingyi heaved a sigh, showing his frustration. “Although I get three meals a day, which keep me energetic and happy, the evolved animals are undeniably impossible to train, even if they were domesticated a thousand years ago. We all know dogs were loyal and obedient most of the time. But they changed completely. None of them listen to me, even if they can’t defeat me. I just can’t make them obey me even once no matter how hard I try.”

“I feel bad for you... but maybe they will get better when you spend more time with them?” Chang suggested, as Mingyi’s emotions affected him. “But you haven’t told me how you found us.”

“Well, Colonel Xie asked me to take care of you guys as you might feel uneasy here. Therefore, they switched me to deliver meals to you.”

“I see,” Chang said, taking in the information. “By any chance, do you know where I can go and workout? I am almost healed now and, to be honest, I have nothing to do at this moment. It’d be great if you could tell me that since I desperately need some exercise.”

“Ah-ha! You asked the right person here.” Mingyi was an unassuming man, so he guessed no further and just told Chang, “The military has selected a few soldiers who are stronger and faster compared to their peers. They gather together and workout

in a training room. I think you can get in as you are much better than those guys.”

“They are training soldiers who are stronger and faster...?” Mingyi’s words created a stirring in Chang’s mind. Somehow this reminded him about what he and Qing Shui discussed three days ago – the medical trial with the red fog concentrate. “What do they do in that room?” Chang asked, unable to loosen the tension in his fist.

## Chapter 79: Radar And Food

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“I am not sure what they do either. They are well-fed, and their only duty is body training,” Mingyi said, throwing his hands in the air. “I really don’t get what the military is thinking. A lot of the researchers only get two meals per day, since the genetically modified crops are still in research. The shortage of food is a serious problem, and yet they ensure that these soldiers’ meals are well-balanced and nutritious.”

“Perhaps they have their own plans.”

Jing woke up while they were talking, Chang waved for her to come over. “Have some breakfast here, you should get some nutrition as you lost too much blood in the previous days.”

Jing jumped off the bed and walked over to the coffee table bare footed. She quietly drank the white sticky juice and chewed a few leaves from the plate. Finished eating, she sat beside Chang without uttering a single word.

In fact, Jing had not spoken since she found out Pangzi went missing. But she didn’t ask where Pangzi had left, and Chang never found a good chance to tell the prepared explanation.

The atmosphere in the room becamings almost depressing once Jing woke up.

Chang glanced at Jing’s face, while the latter remained silent. He reached out for the glass that Jing just drank from and finished the

rest of the mixture. He stood up and changed his tone when addressing Mingyi.

“Let’s go, man. Show me the training room.”

Mingyi also stood up from the couch.

“Take me with you!” Jing’s words broke the awkward silence as her almost hoarse voice asked Chang to bring her along.

“You want to come with me?” Chang asked, hunkering down beside her.

“I want to go with you,” Jing said, making her intention more clear by nodding.

“Alright.” Chang picked her thin body up like he always did. The corridor was bright compared to the red fog outside the windows. The institute was sealed and there were gas filters installed at the ceiling, making the building free of red fog.

On their way, they passed numerous windows and doors. The illumination in labs projected shadows on their body, though they quickly slipped away from them as they continued to walk. Soon, the three of them arrived at a rather big gym. The guards didn’t give them any trouble as Mingyi was a familiar face that had visited this place multiple times.

When they entered the gym, Chang realized that it was larger

than it'd looked from the outside. But surprisingly, it was as ordinary as any gym he would have seen before the apocalypse. The training place provided all sorts of training equipment which were modified specially for those soldiers. Chang lifted one of the dumbbells and immediately realized that there was extra weight on it. Other than that, the gym was nothing like Chang imagined. He'd thought it would be futuristic and fascinating, but it was almost too unexceptional. Never would he have thought the super soldiers trained in here.

Their arrival didn't garner too much attention, the soldiers just kept on training.

"Jing, what is their danger index in your mind?" Chang whispered to Jing habitually, and Jing was about to answer like she did every time, but she closed her mouth alertly this time.

As if he discerned something unusual, Chang turned his head and looked at Mingyi's concerned face. It looked good-natured, but curiosity filled the man's eyes.

Chang paused as he recalled he had exhorted Mingyi again and again to take good care of Jing; now that he gazed at Mingyi's smiley face, he perceived a sense of delicacy of Mingyi's mind. Apparently, Mingyi hadn't forgotten Chang's extra unsettlement for having to leave Jing, and he seemed to develop a genuine interest in their secret.

Fortunately, Chang and Jing always whispered in each other's ears, so it would have been impossible for Mingyi to hear the content of their words. But the feeling of being monitored was

unpleasant none the less.

“What were you guys talking about?” Mingyi questioned after the absurdly long pause between Jing and Chang, his ingenious smile concealing his purpose. “Are you guys speaking something that even a comrade like me shouldn’t hear?”

“Nothing that you should be concerned about, she just likes to tell me her girly secrets,” Chang answered, curving his mouth to make a smile. He was already on guard against Mingyi.

Although Mingyi’s impression was always positive, Chang could never put trust in him. Nor anyone else in this institute. This moment of realization was brutal; Chang understood that he could no longer just casually ask Jing for the danger index when living in this place. It was unsafe, and they might have been watched from the moment they stepped in.

For the first time, Chang became aware of the fact that EMs were extremely rare among humans. The research institute didn’t seem to be conscious about the presence of psychic EMs. Both Qing Shui and Zhuo were in the cognitive category... But Jing was completely different from them.

In some sense, Jing would not be an ideal subject for scientific research but instead very powerful in military planning. Chang could even imagine how the military would turn her into a living radar; the help she could provide to the military was immeasurable.

Thinking of the possible consequences, Chang was soaked in cold sweat.

He avoided talking to Jing but started chatting with Mingyi, who soon left for his duty of animal training. Chang began to train with his mouth shut tight while Jing quietly gazed into the red fog outside the window.

It was a day as plain as water with a surging undercurrent of disquiet.

When the sun disappeared behind the horizon, the lights in the institute flickered on one by one. Chang and Jing returned to their suite. He only drank a glass of the same sticky mixture sent from the military and brushed his teeth before lying on the bed with a troubled heart. Eyes closed, he didn't want to speak to Qing Shui nor did he want to move. All he wanted was to have a quiet rest.

Jing was the same as two days ago, she laid down peacefully beside Chang.

But she differently from yesterday, she spoke up and her gentle words sounded loud in the silent space.

"Chang, as long as I am staying in here, I am in danger. Right?" she murmured.

"Well, I can't deny that, but you have Mr. Li and me to accompany you. There is nothing you should be worried about,"



Chang said, resisting to show his surprise for her sensitivity with great effort. He comforted her saying, “Don’t be afraid, as long as you refrain from telling anyone about your ability, nobody will know.”

“Chang, will I die in here?”

“What are you talking about? Of course not!” Chang almost jumped out of the bed as the triggering words slipped out from her lips. However, considering the environment she was living in, his promise lacked confidence. “I will die before you if that day comes.”

“But that makes me feel worse.” Jing fiddled with the new pendant on Chang’s necklace and mumbled, “Can you promise me something please?”

“Tell me.”

“If I died...” Her index finger pressed hard on an empty spot of the necklace. “Can you save me a spot here? I do want to be in your company forever.”

“Jing, this is not a good joke,” Chang growled, her request irritating him for some reason. Pangzi’s broken body kept flashing in his eyes and the last words were read repeatedly in his mind. He turned away from Jing, facing her with his back.

“But Chang...”

“Say no more, there is no spot secured for you, not on my necklace.”

The two laid on the bed with thoughts roaming in their head, the air cool between them.

“The training significantly improved your danger index, it increased by 0.2 today. This is more than 10 times faster than the improvement speed of those others in the gym. I don’t know how this could happen.” After the silence, Jing took the initiative to break the ice. “The danger index is 7 in average for the trainees in the gym, but there is one exception. It’s the one who was sitting in the corner for a long time.”

“I think that was because this is my first training day. The increase will slow down as I go more often. There is always a ceiling for physical strength,” Chang said, turning around. He then continued, “How is that person more exceptional than the others?”

“His pattern is unstable... It was strange how his index went up to 20 something then dropped back to 7 or 8 out of a sudden.”

“Could it be that the military has started the medical trial on these trainees?” Qing Shui asked, interrupting their conversation. His eyes, though, were still on the computer. “Extreme instability, the peak index is three times greater than the bottom - this exceeds what a human body can handle. That person must be dying.”

“You are saying even people nowadays, including those who have

high danger index, are still vulnerable to the red fog concentrate?” Chang asked, shifting to face Qing Shui.

“I was just guessing. If they ever had this concentrate injected to someone, considering the failure from Russia, it might still fail at this time too. But we aren’t far from success. Let’s wait and see.” Qing Shui resumed his reading mode after making his statement.

Chang fell asleep soon after once more exhorting Jing not to display her ability in public.

The next day Chang got out of bed as the sun shed light into the room. Qing Shui was still reading as if he hadn’t slept since the day he started. It was again Mingyi who knocked on the door with food on the tray.

“We only have this much today,” Mingyi said apologetically, as he placed a glass of white mixture and a plate of leaves on the coffee table. He sighed.

“The food shortage is becoming more serious. I heard rumors of rebellion from some of the soldiers around me,” he added, deeply worried. “We are fortunate enough to be covered, but most of the soldiers only get a full meal every two or three days. The rest of the time they have to rely on plants grown around the institute. This results in people getting poisoned every day. There’s no other way, a riot is coming!”

“Is it this bad already?” Qing Shui asked, standing up from the chair like a launched rocket. “If the social structure collapses, we

will be losing our last advantage. This is not only a natural apocalypse but also a social disaster, humanity is doomed without social structure.”

Qing Shui opened the door for the first time since he moved in.

“I’ll go check out the group which is conducting research on new crops, just wait here.”

The door shut, leaving a mixture of hope and worry.

10 minutes later, Qing Shui reentered, light-hearted. “They made it! I saw the sprouts in the incubator, Zhuo made this happen!”

“Was he also an EM?” Chang asked. The name was familiar to him.

“He is, and an excellent researcher! I doubt that his EM index is higher than mine but he disguised that by lying in the test.” Qing Shui almost admired Zhuo. “I really want to collaborate with him but his idea is too advanced for me to understand. In one sentence, he is an extraordinary person!”

## Chapter 80: Crystal Pea

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“Did they mention when they would start the trial planting?” Ming Yi asked, displaying strong curiosity.

“They planted some experimental fields, and although it was only a trial, the amount they planted could be considered as a real production.” Qing Shui’s knitted brows relaxed as he spoke, though his tone remained high. He was still concerned. “Though, I am not yet sure if this plant is genetically stable enough to resist mutation in the red fog environment.

“However, this is good news overall. You can spread it to calm the riot,” Qing Shui said, smiling with determination at Ming Yi. “But you don’t need to feel obligated to do this. After all, stabilizing the military is the institute’s priority. It will inform the military soon.”

“Of course! The goal of the riot is to get food supplies, after all. So if the supply is guaranteed, there is no more benefit in rioting.” Ming Yi grinned. “I shall leave now, can’t wait to let my friends know about this!”

“Talk to you soon!” Qing Shui said, sending him away with a salute. He then returned to the computer immediately after closing the door.

His facial expression quickly changed once he made sure Ming Yi was no longer around. It turned grave, and the smile vanished.

“What’s wrong?” Chang asked, knowing that Qing Shui had something on his mind when he looked burdened. “Was it the food that they are working on?”

“Yes... I am seriously concerned about the food they are planting. Although they “branded” it as a new type of crop, essentially it is a gene-altered horror.” The blue light emitted from the computer screen made Qing Shui look extra upset. “They extracted DNAs from other plants and animals that they considered desirable and inserted them accordingly. Besides that, they also grew the crop with the aid of the red fog. I have to admit that the yield and the nutrients in it are impressive, but the way they made the crop is insane. They are bargaining with a demon!

“This just proves how they are the left-wings; they could have put more effort in finding naturally edible food, instead of artificially modifying crops without knowing the consequences.” Qing Shui was becoming more and more angry as he spoke. “Zhuo even considered transferring genes from the mutated animals to human bodies to make super humans; the idea is just too bold and risky!”

“Is it bad to consume this modified food?” Chang asked, since he wasn’t too knowledgeable about gene modification. His only issue with the food was its safety.

“Sadly I can’t tell you the consequences that eating it might have. In fact, the safety of genetically modified food – acronymed as GM food – was highly controversial among scientists even before the red fog apocalypse. All I know is that it will be too late to regret when it causes severe harm,” Qing Shui patiently explained. “To

illustrate my idea figuratively, the evolved plants and animals look strange to us, but they are natural products of evolution; such change isn't forced and didn't happen against their will. In theory, they are more natural than we perceive them to be. They aren't monsters even if their images deviate from what we think is normal.

“But what Zhuo plans to do next is building a creature by modifying and transferring genes from many different types of animals. It would then make this creature become the strongest being in the red fog. Zhuo is prompt on sketching the blueprint for this creature, but he ignores the potential of irreversible consequences.”

“What can we do about that?” Chang asked. This was the first time he'd heard such a strong statement from Qing Shui.

“There is nothing we can do; I am not in a position where I can dispute Zhuo. I can't stop anything from happening right now. And what makes me feel even more powerless is the fact that I have no time and resources to find something edible that could be consumed by the masses. We'll just have to remain silent and keep to our diet,” stated Qing Shui, finally turning to Chang and gazing at him with mixed emotions. “There must be spare food which is not genetically modified. It will be left in the inventory when they make this new crop available to the masses and the military. We'll have to keep eating it until I find a different solution.”

Qing Shui was reluctant to confess the difficulties they were facing.

“Don’t worry about us, we’ll do as you say,” Chang promised. He simply put his full trust in Qing Shui. “I’ll help you find those edible crops soon.”

Qing Shui rubbed his tired eyes and thanked Chang, “I am really happy that you understand me. I’ve almost finished reading the material they gave me. In another two or three days, I will draft the new ecology theory so I can enter the top level of the research institute.”

“Sure!” Chang agreed easily. “I will keep up with the training while you’re working on your paper.”

He quietly left the room to go to the gym with Jing to ensure that Qing Shui was not bothered.

Three days later, the research institute released news that blew everyone’s mind.

The new crop was successfully built and produced in the experimental fields. It was named “Crystal Pea” by Zhuo because of its clear appearance. Being a crop that had a short growth cycle, high yield and was rich in nutrients, its debut shocked the world. The Crystal Pea matured in seven days and yielded 16 – 20 tons per hectare.

If the previous two features didn’t sound exceptional enough during the red fog, the fact of nutrient-richness was jaw dropping. According to Zhuo, the creator, 300 grams of the Crystal Pea could easily fulfill the nutritional needs of an adult; this product alone



might be capable in solving the food crisis of all mankind.

“This 100% purity is pure bullsh\*t!” Qing Shui shouted out upon reading the announcement to the public and cast the newspaper back on the desk.

At the same time, his door opened without a knock to reveal Chang and Jing.

“They gave you a great office, didn’t they?” Chang asked, feeling happy for Qing Shui from the bottom of his heart. “It feels good to get promoted, right? You even have your own office now! Did they also give you tons of work to do?”

“Not yet. What about you?” Qing Shui asked, noticing the shape of the muscles on Chang’s arm having become more defined. “Your danger index?”

“Approaching 6.”

“Be careful about your muscle growth. It will weaken your flexibility if they grow too big.”

“I know, that’s why I’ve been limiting my protein consumption in my diet.”

“Good to hear that! How is the guy who had the unstable danger index in the gym? Is he dead?”

“His index has dropped gradually and now it’s below 4. I think he’ll be even weaker than an ordinary person in a few days,” Jing answered.

“That day will be his last one to live,” Qing Shui said. He might have added more but a series of brisk knocks interrupted him. The door was opened before Qing Shui could give permission, as if the knocking was merely a polite notice.

A smiling young man walked in.

“Hello, Qing Shui!” the man greeted. He looked kind and harmless, and didn’t forget to acknowledge the others too. “And your family is here also!”

“They are passing by. What can I do for you, Zhuo?” Qing Shui asked, his face lighting up with a barely noticeable fake smile.

“Nothing in particular. I just wanted you to try out our new food, the Crystal Pea!” Zhuo said with excitement, casually moving toward Qing Shui’s desk. He took out a clear glass container from his white lab coat and gently placed it in front of Qing Shui.

“Thank you for coming by,” Qing Shui replied, keeping the grin on his face. “You saved the whole Zhengzhou by creating the Crystal Pea, good job on solving the food crisis!”

“Hahaha... Don’t make this into a big deal. I am pretty sure

someone would have solved the problem even if I didn't do it," Zhuo said modestly, nodding. "Speaking of solving problems, the paper you just published yesterday was extraordinary and brilliant! Your theory on Earth's ecology accurately delineated the new climate and the biological systematics; I was thrilled to read it! Especially the preliminary theory of food web! It really astonished all the research groups! The establishment of the ecology theory helped to clear up the myths ahead of us; it is truly a lighthouse of our field."

"Hahaha... Let's not flatter each other." Qing Shui took the glassware that was filled with the Crystal Pea and placed it into a drawer. "You must have another reason for coming by, don't you?"

"It is really pleasant to talk with smart people," Zhuo noted, his kind smile remaining on his face. "I'll make it short then. The Lieutenant General has kindly asked me to invite you to join Group Alpha."

"I'll take your kind invitation into careful consideration," Qing Shui said, interrupting Zhuo, and making the promise without a second thought.

It was a clear denial from Qing Shui.

His attitude stiffened Zhuo's smile. "I see you do need some time to think about my proposal, since this should be a careful decision as you said. I might as well just come by three days from now." Zhuo looked away as if he was disappointed. "I think I forgot to mention this, we will be harvesting the Crystal Pea in three days.

As far as I know, everyone will be switching to the Crystal Pea since our food reserves are lacking. But Group Alpha is an exception from this arrangement. I am pretty sure you understand what I mean better than anyone else.”

“You are threatening me,” Qing Shui said, not allowing any emotion to show on his face.

“I’m just hoping that you will take my invitation seriously,” Zhuo said, slamming the door when he exited the office. “I’ll see you in three days. I am truly looking forward to hearing your final decision.”

“How arrogant...” Chang vented his disappointment once Zhuo left.

“This is how the left-wing does things, no different from my expectations,” Qing Shui murmured. “We need to accelerate the execution of our plan under their threat.”

“No problem, I was about to say that too. My plan today is to go out and find something edible. I am positive that even though the wild may be dangerous, my ability has improved enough by now. Hunting should actually be easier now that I have experience and my strength has increased,” Chang stated with confidence. “Zhengzhou is less dangerous compared to Kaifeng, I should be fine as long as I don’t go into the jungle.”

“I like your enthusiasm, but you also need to keep in mind that Zhengzhou is more civilized and many people reside in here. It

means that there is less plants around here, and of fewer variety. My goal for you is to find something reproducible. Otherwise hunting will occupy most of your time every day. I need you more often than you think, so we shouldn't waste time getting food daily."

# Chapter 81: Wisdom Of Ordinary People

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“I see,” Chang replied, showing his understanding. “I’ll be heading out then. It’s better to do it sooner rather than later.”

“I agree.”

Qing Shui sent them away with a wave of his hand, and Chang left his office with Jing.

In the suite, Chang rinsed his crossbow with water to ensure the trigger mechanism could eject the bolts smoothly without having dry blood hindering it. Once cleaned, he checked the crossbow again and unfolded a piece of cloth. Two daggers were wrapped within it. He’d asked asked them from the military.

Before leaving, Chang tenderly explained the situation to Jing, “So... Jing, you don’t need to go out with me this time. I’ll just wander around the city and get back before sunset. No... it is not because I don’t want to take you with me. Instead, taking you with me could raise eyebrows as you always stay with me. People like Zhuo are extremely sensitive and suspicious about anything unusual, and I don’t want them to know about your ability.”

“But it is still quite dangerous even if we are in the city now. Your safety is not guaranteed,” Jing said, deeply concerned.

“Don’t be worried, I promise that I will be back before sunset, alright?” Chang’s palm gently stroked her soft hair. “If they ever find out that you are an EM, it’ll become dangerous to continue

staying in the institute. That's why I said you should remain here while I am out. Hopefully this way they won't suspect you."

Jing spoke nothing, although her mouth opened. In the end, she only nodded with lingering unwillingness; her eyes clearly betrayed her inward unease. "You promise to come back before sunset, right?"

"Pinky promise?" Chang put out his little finger.

"It's a promise!" she declared. Her slim pinky finger tightly knotted with Chang's and relief lightened her features.

Chang patted her back before parting. He stood up with the crossbow strapped to his back, and both daggers secured in sheaths on his waist. He left the institute quietly, without catching too much attention.

The outside was still bathed in the red fog. It was the first time in a while for Chang to leave the institute where the red fog was extracted through the ventilation system.

The guards at the gate didn't block him from going out as they were familiar with his face.

He returned to the world where ordinary people lived.

Everything he had used in the recent days belonged to the new upper class of the society, the researchers and ranked military

officers. But in the city, there was nothing; this was a normal place where ordinary people struggled to survive.

The taste of the air was also familiar to Chang.

To be honest, although he was fortunate enough to live in the institute where safety and food were guaranteed, he didn't feel like he fit in that well. He neither understood politics nor was he knowledgeable enough to be a researcher. And without those two skills, he was no different from an ordinary person. So even though the world out here was more intimidating and threatening, he felt more comfortable walking on the broken pathway than through the institute's corridors.

Humans were born as social animals, and this instinct was never dropped regardless of the circumstances. Although the red fog made conflicts more frequent, the majority of ordinary humans chose to band into small groups to elevate their chances of survival.

These small groups aimlessly wandered through the streets, searching for something edible. Just as Chang was doing.

He had made a solemn vow to Qing Shui that he would return with a reproducible plant, but in fact, he had no idea where to find it. Chang was merely a high school student. Even if he were to utilize everything he knew about plants, he doubted if he could ever tell if a plant was edible or not.

Therefore, he did nothing in the morning but ambled around. He



witnessed the chaos among the vulnerable crowds, and this was the only thing he learned about the outside world.

Until he noticed a man – a man who carried a wired cage with him.

This man looked like to be in his mid 50s, and was closely followed by his wife and two kids. The family roamed around the streets with iron bars and kitchen knives in hands. They were no different from the others who spent day and night to searching for food.

Chang had noticed them from far away quite a while ago, but he didn't pay attention to them as they were just as ordinary as the other small groups in Zhengzhou. However, the man's actions intrigued Chang. He was feeding the bug in the cage intermittently. The cage was held in his right hand, while he used the left to collect small pieces of plants that he saw and give them to the little bug inside the cage. The man seemed in rapt attention, none of his family members saying anything against it.

Chang tailed them for almost a kilometer as he dwelled on how he should approach them. He eliminated a few possibilities and then threw all his considerations away. Giving up on it, he simply went up to them instead.

Slowly he made himself appear in their vision. The family became extremely alarmed as they saw him.

“Who are you?” the man asked, raising his weapon at the same

time as his children. It frightened them even more that his face was an unfamiliar one. The man shouted out loud, “I don’t care who you are but I would not recommend you to come forward. You know the rules, no one should enter another’s three meter zone. And if you’re thinking of robbing us for food, just forget it. We don’t have any, either.”

“Don’t be nervous, I am not coming to do harm,” Chang said, raising his bare hands to prove his words. He completely understood their tension. It was obvious the tragic fights among groups would never stop as long as the world remained as undisciplined as it was now. Law reinforcement had lost its power since they were not privileged in having better vision than others. The best that the military could do was to prevent a serious riot, but they were powerless to refrain the public from scuffling here and there. But at least the society was still functioning, even if with an agitated undercurrent.

Chang straightened his arms and raised them up high to show the family that he had no intentions to do harm.

“I don’t want to fight you all. I just came to ask a few questions.”

“Alright, alright. Then stay where you are, don’t come any closer.” The family loosened their guard but still wished to keep distance.

“Thanks, I was just curious about the bug that you hold in the cage. What is it?”

“I am afraid you will be disappointed... I don’t know it either, man. It is just a ordinary evolved bug I guess.”

“Then why do you keep feeding it?” Chang asked his second question from the family.

“You have been following us?” They became fretful again.

“No... I did not, I just happened to see it. How about this...” As Chang spoke, he removed one of the sheaths that were tied to his belt and pulled out a dagger. “I know your weapons are mostly homemade. They were kitchenware originally. So they are not very handy for defending, are they? My dagger was made from steel in the armory, and is as sharp as you can imagine. I believe it is more useful than those knives in your hands.” Chang waved the dagger to show its fineness. He then pointed at the man’s cage, “If you can tell me what it can do for you, I’ll return the favor by giving you this dagger. What do you think?”

“Deal!” the man agreed to the exchange without a second thought. “I can even give you the cage with the bug, but you have to slide your dagger to me first.”

Neither of them spent anymore time on bargaining.

Chang could have just stolen the cage shamelessly but that would have crossed his bottom line. Plus, he was much more powerful than the whole family. There was no need for him to worry that they would take the dagger and run away.

“Neat!” The dagger stopped beside the man’s right foot, and he became assured of its quality after grabbing it in hand. “We found the bugs by accident. They are omnivorous with preference to plants, and seem to have a keen sense of smell. Maybe because of it they can distinguish between edible plants and not. Thus, we caged one and used it to look for edible plants. Surprisingly, it is quite picky about food. If something smells bad or toxic, it won’t eat it; but whatever is edible to it, humans are safe to consume it too.

“When I found out this unique characteristic of the bug, I thought it’d be helpful to us in this world. After all, the plants are all evolved and mutated, the edible ones might have become inedible, while the inedible might have turned edible. I think there is generally a sufficient amount of food in this world, it’s just that most of the humans don’t have the guts to test them out.”

As the man explained, the small cage was rolled to Chang. It sent up small cloud of dust as it came toward him.

“There you go. We have a lot of these bugs living in the water pipe, so we’ll just catch another one.”

“Thank you!” Chang expressed his gratitude, and picked up the cage, scanning the bug.

It was an ordinary looking bug as the man had said, its appearance similar to a longhorn beetle. Everything seemed normal except for those extra-long antennae which implied its extraordinary sense of smell.

Both parties in this trade were happy about what they got, but they never put full trust in the other at the same time.

A troop of soldiers patrolled past them. They were all well-armed, and the soldier at the very front made repeated announcement through a megaphone, “Attention, attention please! We are here to inform you that a new crop has been developed in the institute. We will start distributing its seeds to the general public in three days! This crop can solve the food crisis completely and we are kindly asking you to endure the remaining three days patiently.”

Sheets of flyers were handed out by the leading soldier. He made sure that he didn't miss out anyone he saw.

The family and Chang received two pieces of coarse paper.

Chang quickly glanced through the flyer and learned its content - it was promoting the Crystal Pea and praising its creator. The flyers obviously exaggerated the benefits of the Crystal Pea. It was even amplifying its effects, making the information seem more convincing and tempting to the hungry.

“We can cultivate this crop? This is so exciting! We won't be starving anymore,” the wife exclaimed with her face painted with ecstasy.

“Oh, come on. Do you really believe that? It's transgene! I won't eat it, you won't eat it, and our kids won't eat it either. Who knows what this pea can do to us?” The man tore the paper immediately

since Zhuo's smile on the flyer seemed suspicious to him.

“What are you talking about? It says edible and nutrient-rich!”  
The wife was clearly upset.

“I won't risk our kids' lives to test out this pea! Perhaps the institute is treating us as lab rats!” the man shouted back.

# Chapter 82: Carefree Days In The Apocalypse

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“Anyways, as long as I am standing, as long as I am still capable of going out to search for food, we will not eat this pea, not even a bite!” the man bellowed. “We will not accept any of this! Not until I die!”

The man picked up the dagger and its sheath in anger. “See you!” He threw the almost-rude farewell to Chang and left with his wife and kids.

Chang pondered the man’s statement while staring at the cage.

The man couldn’t be more ordinary than everyone else; people like him lived everywhere in the city. They were not equipped with sufficient amount of knowledge in science, and neither were they as smart or analytical as Qing Shui and Zhuo. They were frightened and fragile, yet they remained skeptical about this seemingly perfect crop. The Crystal Pea was just too good to be real.

Human beings weren’t as great as they would imagine themselves to be, yet they were stronger than they knew themselves to be. The commoners who endured the deadly evolution were slowly adapting to this disconcerting world.

If the Crystal Pea was as menacing a crop as Qing Shui suspected, then whoever consumed this pea would be slowly but surely eliminated from this planet without a trace.

As a human, Chang knew that the majority of the commoners would consume the Crystal Pea to avoid the painful starvation. In result, the Crystal Pea would become a largely consumed crop, which would force people to rely on the periodic seed distributions. After all, the crop's reproductive ability was intentionally removed - the testa of the harvested pea was too thick for water to permeate, making the germination simply impossible - to control the food supply. Only then would Zhuo's ambition be fulfilled - to control the masses and receive the worship that he desired.

However, Chang couldn't see the true aim behind this kind of behavior.

"What is he going to do with that power?" Chang asked himself. He had qualms about Zhuo's ultimate goal. "Has he ever thought about the consequences?"

Chang failed to figure out the purpose behind his actions, hence he put aside the issue. After all, even if he was able to see through Zhuo's intrigues, he would still be too powerless to stop him from executing whatever evil plans he had.

He was too negligible in the political struggle; he could only watch his own back.

Therefore, Chang shook his head and smiled wryly. He walked away and started using the same method as the man to search for edible plants.



The plants had evolved significantly since the first day of the apocalypse; they grew in shapes or forms that Chang had not seen before. The tiny yet tenacious sprouts broke through the concrete road. By eyeballing, it was hard to distinguish whether a plant was edible or not.

Though his job was easier with the bug's aid.

People were arguing here and there, but Chang only focused on utilizing the ability of the bug to look for edible plants. The afternoon was a fruitful one. Each plant that the bug chomped on, Chang collected and wrapped its leaves and a seed in a piece of cloth. It was a rather worthwhile harvest as he gathered about seven or eight different plants in the cloth pocket.

When the sky gradually lost its brightness, he returned to the institute and found Qing Shui.

“Buddy! I found eight edible plants! Though I don't know which one can be reproduced in a large scale...” Chang said with excitement, carefully placing the cloth pocket on Qing Shui's lab table.

“Eight?” Qing Shui stroked the cloth. “You're really good at this, aren't you?”

“No... This little guy should take all the credit,” Chang said, putting the cage on the table to reveal his helper.

“Impressive!” Qing Shui exclaimed. “Tomorrow, I’ll have these planted in the experimental field, and hopefully some of them will reproduce. This way, more will be saved...”

Chang gazed at Qing Shui’s calm face, grinning. “To be honest, you seem cold and unapproachable, but you do have a big heart.”

Qing Shui’s benevolence reminded Chang about how they had went back to the jungle to find Pangzi. They even made a fist bump at the time. It was something that Chang had least expected Qing Shui to do. Qing Shui had gradually become cold-hearted and less human-like since he attained his ability, but deep down in his heart, he had not lost sympathy. He had just chosen to conceal his emotions and only let them slip out around the people he trusted.

Chang turned away and left the office. Before the door closed, his last sentence slipped through the closing door. “And I think that’s what makes you different from Zhuo.”

Chang ran all the way back to their suite so that he could see Jing sooner.

“I am back!” he shouted out, bursting in. Light streamed into the dark room when the door was opened, and he found Jing sitting on a chair close to the door. She had sensed his return long ago, and thus, she had been waiting patiently. Her presence warmed his heart, and he gently hugged her, then fondled her hair. “You were worried, weren’t you?”

“I was,” Jing agreed with a nod. Her fingers softly yet firmly grasped his shirt.

“Let me see if there is anything we can do for fun.”

Jing quietly nodded again.

Chang stood up and walked around the suite – of course it wouldn't have any toys or games; there wasn't any television or internet either. He had no idea what they could do in here.

Pondering it for a while, Chang seemed to have an idea. He pushed over the wooden tea table, and then sawed off pieces of similar length from the table's legs using the sawtooth side of his military dagger. Afterwards, he further divided the wood from the table legs to make 16 chess pieces, which were marked into four groups. Chang drew a simplified aeroplane chess board on four pieces of paper that were taped together.

Upon finishing the game, he felt very accomplished, and laughing waved for Jing to come closer. In this desperate world, they could enjoy a moment of pure joy by playing this rough-made chess.

This was the first time they had ever had some sort of entertainment since the beginning of the apocalypse. They had become family without the need for blood ties, depending on one another and looking after each other. Protecting this new found family became one of their life goals, and they would not abandon the other no matter what.

The smile on Jing's face was innocent, pure and heart soothing.

The game reminded Chang of his own childhood – the colorful marbles he treasured, the hero cards he collected, the chess he played with his grandpa... The distant happiness surged out, and for a second it made him forget where he was. Like he was still living in the peaceful days before the apocalypse.

However, nothing was the same. The happiness would not come back. He was forced to grow up in just a bit over a month. Forced to become a man of no scruples. He was more mature now, but at the cost of his own happiness.

They played the aeroplane chess again and again, until Qing Shui came back from the lab. He then joined the game without any hesitation.

At the end, the trio found endless joy from such a simple game. They played it til midnight, until they could no longer resist the fatigue. Then they slept on the bed with happiness that had been absent from their life.

Unfortunately, the joy was short-lived in the apocalypse.

The next morning, when everyone woke up, they tensed up once more.

The next two days Chang went out to search for edible plants

with the bug's help, while Qing Shui secretly planted the seeds that Chang brought back.

In three days, Chang brought 27 types of seeds, 18 of which sprouted after seeding. Qing Shui studied and estimated that three of them could be reproduced in a large scale given their properties. Except for the plants, Qing Shui had also found a white worm.

It was half transparent and with a smooth surface. No bigger than a rice grain, round bodied, and without any aggressiveness at all. However, the speed of its reproduction was unimaginably fast for an insect. It consumed basically everything as a source of energy. "It is a kind that could survive because of its fecundity and diversity."

Qing Shui later discovered that the strange worm had high protein, and was easy to cultivate. He asked Chang to collect more of this insect and made a special field to cultivate them.

Hence, working together Qing Shui and Chang came up with a rough idea of how to feed themselves without the Crystal Pea.

In three days, a heart-stirring news spread through Zhengzhou – the Crystal Pea was ready to be harvested!

Tons of the Crystal Pea were distributed to the military and the citizens. The plant was as nutrient-rich as they had marketed – 300g of the Crystal Pea could fulfill the daily needs of an adult.

The Crystal Pea was immediately accepted by the masses as if it was a light shed to clear the darkness. The people were in deep awe of the creator of the Pea.

The military began to deify Zhuo to gain control over people's minds.

A commendation meeting happened the next day. Qing Shui sat at the very back and hid himself in the shadows. The man on the stage passionately spoke about the benefits of the Crystal Pea and how Zhuo succeeded in his mission. But Qing Shui only half-listened with his brows tied closely together.

"Aren't they just boring? Speaking the same thing over and over again," Zhuo asked softly, quietly sitting down beside Qing Shui. The young man always masked himself with a gentle smile.

"It is tedious, but we Chinese people are always good at deifying a man who stood out to save the masses. It seems meaningless but you know what it can do to the people, don't you? Otherwise your wouldn't have planned it secretly," Qing Shui said, turning to face Zhuo. "Speaking of which, shouldn't you, the hero, be sitting in the front row to receive the medal?"

"I ought to be there as you said, but I prefer to sit next to someone that is smart." Zhuo looked back at him. "I heard that you are researching the edible plants as well?"

## Chapter 83: Bizarreness

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“You are right, I am, indeed, conducting a food experiment. After all, I can’t always rely on someone else.”

“Cool.” The smile on Zhuo’s face didn’t change even a bit. “But you don’t have to rush as the Crystal Pea is sufficient enough for everyone. I just want to apologize for what I’ve said a few days ago; I was too worried about this. But by any chance, would you be interested in joining our research in group Alpha?” Zhuo hazarded again.

“I...” Qing Shui was going to decline his offer again, but he was interrupted before being able to speak the words.

“Again, I understand that you might have no interest in working with us. But I figured that it is necessary to show you what we have achieved before you make any decision as you have no knowledge of what we are researching yet. I am confident that even if it’s you, you won’t be able to turn away from this great temptation. Qing Shui, we are the same kind of people, even though you might deny that.”

“What have you done?” Qing Shui’s eyes lingered on Zhuo’s mysterious smile. He was intrigued.

“Would you come with me later? Words are not persuasive enough for you, so I’d show you my great work on transgene.” Zhuo gazed at Qing Shui’s eyes as if he was trying to look into his very soul.

“Of course,” Qing Shui agreed with a tilt of his head.

“Like I said, you are different from those ignorant yet arrogant ‘scientists’.” Zhuo was happy with Qing Shui’s answer and stood up once a bright ray of light descended on him. “I’m going to get the medal that they are awarding me with, see you at the front door.”

Qing Shui didn’t reply to the man bathed in the sharp light but nodded. He sunk back into his chair, quietly following Zhuo’s silhouette with his eyes, contemplating.

Zhuo leaned forward on the stage so that the Lieutenant General could place the medal on the left side of his chest with ease. He disappeared in the dark as soon as he left the stage, and Qing Shui knew it was time to leave. They walked together to the test area that was specially assigned to Group Alpha.

Technically, Group Alpha wasn’t located in the main building. It was rather remote as it was built underground; the only entrance and exit being at the ground level of the institute. The door itself was almost unnoticeable except for there being two armed soldiers guarding it at all times. The security level was one of the highest in this institute as Zhuo needed to scan his retina and sign his name on a document that indicated the time he entered and exited; the document was kept with the two soldiers just in case the digital scanning record was lost during an external attack.

The equipment in Group Alpha was far more advanced than



anywhere else that Qing Shui had been to. They had the best machines gathered for their transgene experiments, and the working area was sophisticatedly designed for better efficiency. It was a completely different world.

Qing Shui wasn't won over by the equipment as he had expected that Group Alpha should have access to the top resources. However, Qing Shui was intrigued by rats that were floating in tiny tanks, aligned neatly one by one on a shelf mounted on the wall. They were placed so closely that it gave an illusion of the whole wall being decorated by these tiny yellow tanks. The concrete was simply nowhere to be seen.

Observing from a close distance, Qing Shui immediately discovered from where this strange feeling was coming from—rats. They were in shapes and forms that Qing Shui could have never thought to see them in. One donned pangolin's armor, another had beefy limbs, while some others were skinny but with absurd bone structure, or even had wings. They were unconventional rats, and each different from the others. The surreality dizzied Qing Shui for a while.

“These are what you made with your proud transgene technique?” Qing Shui's finger lingered on one of the tiny tanks.

“They are merely my experimental byproduct, believe it or not.” Zhuo was gratified by the astonishment on Qing Shui's face. “How marvellous they are! Thanks to the red fog concentrate, we could introduce the desired gene pieces from other species into the rats free of rejection! Don't you think this was how god made us?”

“I believe the way he made us wasn’t as inferior as you made them,” Qing Shui responded with a sneer.

“Well, it might seem primitive to you, after all, we only started a month or so ago.” It sounded like Zhuo didn’t hear any of Qing Shui’s comments, he dawdled around his ‘artworks’. “Look at all these man-made creatures, how beautiful and strong they are! They’ll be able to outcompete other species if I released them out.”

“I simply don’t think so.” The yellow tint reflected on Qing Shui’s face as he looked closely at a rat’s body. He asked, “These transgene creatures... I doubt they reproduce, do they?”

“You brought up an interesting problem that I have not yet been able to solve.” Qing Shui’s question pointed at the weakest spot in Zhuo’s research. He threw his hands and grinned wryly. “As I said, we’ve just started. If you would join us, I believe such issues could be resolved soon.

“Oh right! I don’t think I have mentioned that those rats were produced in my early experimenting stage. Come, I’ll show you what I really am capable of making, and I am the only person who’s made it. This is real art!” As Zhuo spoke, he opened a side door. “This way.”

Fanaticism and ecstasy were clearly written on Zhuo’s face. He couldn’t resist showing off his creation to someone who he thought deserved to see his work.

Led by curiosity, Qing Shui walked into the room whose door

silently sealed behind once he entered.

It was spacious.

Instead of a room, Qing Shui would have called it an experimental field. Although it was constructed underground, it seemed broader than outside, now that it was limited by the red fog. The place was half as big as a soccer field, and human-sized glass containers were neatly aligned on both sides of the room. They were filled with some red sticky solution, which was as condense as the red fog concentrate.

The room lit up progressively as they went further, the light revealing the contents in the containers—humans. Of all sorts. Men, women, children, infants, even elders!

“Human subject research? You are conducting your experiments on humans?” Qing Shui asked in disbelief, his shock so great that his mind went blank for a second.

“You should calm down, Qing Shui. They are not dead.” Zhuo walked to one side, and knocked on a glass container.

Upon knocking, the human in the container moved reflexively, without conscious thought, then soon relaxed again.

“See, they’re alive.” Zhuo smirked.

“But that doesn’t disguise the fact that you are doing human

subject research.” Qing Shui kept frowning.

“Well, what if I tell you that they volunteered for my experiments?” Zhuo shrugged his shoulders. “At the very beginning of the apocalypse, many died because of their weakened immune system. If they hadn’t turned to me, they’d be dead bodies rotting somewhere on the street like stray dogs. I gave them a second life; no reason for me to take your criticism.”

“I am not trying to criticize you, nor am I willing to debate with you about ethics. We are different kind of people, that’s it,” Qing Shui said, almost venting out his anger but barely holding onto it. “And that’s all, isn’t it?”

“Surprise! Seems like you’re always underestimating me. I am so disappointed, Qing Shui. Let me feed you with some real stuff.” Zhuo almost rushed to the end of the room, where there was a button beside a container. Zhuo pressed it with his hand shaking due to excitement.

Soon, the cord that was connected with this person’s brain delivered an electric impulse to the inside. The person slowly regained his consciousness.

“Wake up! Wake up! Your moment has come!” Zhuo yelled delightfully as the person opened his eyes.

The person moved in the tank as if he was trying to warm up his body.

“Get out of the tank, you dumbass! I do not tolerate mistakes.” Zhuo climbed up the stairs and rudely dragged the person out of his tank.

The person lied on the ground on his stomach while Zhuo asked Qing Shui to stay tolerant.

“You have to be patient, he is quite weak at this moment. But that is because he was just woken up and needs some time to recoordinate. You will be the first person besides me to witness the power of this creature!” Zhuo even kicked the person, laughing. “And don’t worry, he won’t harm us. He is flawless. This is the prototype of the super soldier I plan to put under mass production. The excess extract from the red fog I dosed him in has made him completely subservient.

“Now, he will only listen to me.” Zhuo recovered from the fanatic stage. He said, “ In five minutes, he’ll surprise you.”

“I am surprised already.” Qing Shui approached the person cautiously. “Is he still a human? He is hairless and extremely pale, covered by hardened keratin scales like those pangolins have... this is what you have made...”

“He is good, isn’t he? The gene expression on him perfectly reflects what I inserted in his genome. Powerful physical strength, hard shell for defense and exceptional vision. A man like this is more useful than an armed troop if you place him in the jungle.”

Meanwhile, the person slowly recovered. He stretched out on the

floor, then stood up.

“See, he is here. Interesting, he recovers faster than I’ve seen him do before.” Zhuo was so excited that he shouted out his joy, his hand examining the joints and the person’s wrinkled skin. The pupil test indicated that the person was fully functional. “Good to go!”

Zhuo then ran to the other side of the experimental field, where he took out a rifle from a cabinet.

“This is what I use to test.” Zhuo pointed the rifle at the pale man. “Hold your breath, I am showing you how much impact he can take with those beautiful scales.”

## Chapter 84: The Most Desired Genes

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Zhuo fired the rifle as he spoke, the sound of the gunfire filling the void of the experimental field. Bullets were ejected from the gun barrel like cheetahs, they all bolted toward the same target -- that hairless bizarre man.

Ratatatat -- --!

These metal cheetahs crashed into the man's pale skin, making a series of deep sounds. Zhuo threw aside the rifle, watching Qing Shui go closer to the strange man. He almost couldn't disguise his exhaltation.

"Ah," the strange man moaned as he saw Qing Shui come closer to him. He raised his right arm, slowly gouging out the bullets from the indentations on its surface. Some bullets had been lucky enough to penetrate his skin but none of them went far enough to injure his organs.

"What do you think of it?" Zhuo laughed out loud with pleasure. "I made him bullet proof! Qing Shui, did you see that? The bonus of this perfect layer of keratin scales is that despite its resistance to impact, it won't slow down his movement at all!"

"Catch it!" Zhuo bent down to pick up the rifle again and threw it to the strange man. "Rip it."

"Ah." The strange man caught the rifle in the air precisely with two hands as if it was a programmed sequence of actions. He broke

the rifle in half by smashing it to his raised knee. He even went further. The broken rifle returned to his knee, the two pieces crushed in half once more. It became four pieces of wasted metal laid on the ground.

“This is how powerful it is.” Zhuo turned to the pale man and shouted, “Come on! Show Mr. Li how fast you are and how you can react.”

The pale man immediately ran around the experimental field as Zhuo commanded. His heavy steps left indentations on the floor. Meanwhile, Zhuo approached Qing Shui to pick up the rifle pieces, flinging each of them to a different corner.

And because he hurled those gun pieces from different angles, the flight paths were quite different from each other. However, the pale man accelerated accordingly and caught the gun pieces one by one as if he was programmed to run this way.

The strange man demonstrated his flexibility and balance as he grabbed all of the pieces before they touched the ground. He didn't even make loud noises during his actions. It was purely an elegant sequence of movements.

“Now, come back!” Zhuo shouted again and the pale man returned to him with the gun pieces in hand. He opened his palm to submit his mission.

“What do you think?” Zhuo flaunted arrogantly as the pale man had performed as well as he planned him to do.



“Not too bad, I don’t think a troop would be able to subdue him.”

Qing Shui stepped closer to carefully observe the man-made creature again. It was as if he wanted to engrave every detail in his mind.

When looking into the pale man’s pupils, he said, “However, his intelligence seems lacking. It deviates far from average.”

“You are not wrong, and that is because I inserted gene segments from other species.” Zhuo didn’t avoid talking about the disadvantages. “Those gene segments messed up with its development. But I don’t care whether it is intelligent or not. I think intelligence would be even troublesome for me. As long as it listens to my commands... Don’t you think?” Zhuo said, fondling the fine scales on the pale man.

His eyes were filled with joy.

“Ah.” The pale man dully nodded.

“On top of that, he can’t evolve further, can he?” Qing Shui continued. “His genes are broken in some way so mutation will be hard.”

“True, it can’t reproduce either, besides having low intelligence and being unable to evolve,” Zhuo said. “Those are the defects but they mean nothing to me. I would say those are even good news -

because all I want is a force that is obedient. I can manage to improve their genes and soon we will have the second generation.

“As to natural evolution, although it is faster than before, it is still much slower than my technique.” Zhuo reveled in his madness. “I can always extract the best DNA sequences out of the most aggressive species in the nature and insert them into my super soldier prototypes. The natural evolution is way too slow. Humans are atop the other species and this fact will not change. How dare they to challenge the thousands of years of human history and technology?

“I am glad that the red fog, this gift from the god, awarded such a brilliant era for scientists like myself. An era of global evolution, an era of chaos. I’ve even executed experiments that I never thought I could conduct in my life! Are there times that are better than we have right now? Join me...” Zhuo reached out his hand to Qing Shui. “Join my research group. I need you, and you are the only person who would be truly helpful to me. Neither of us is superior to the other, and so we will only conduct the research we love with the time on our side.”

“Humankind will prosper with elites like you and me. Those other stupid pigs don’t deserve to pass on their genes.” Zhuo kept on proposing his great plan, his eyes revealing his bloodthirstiness. “What do you think, Mr. Li? If you’ve made up your mind already, just tell me your decision right now!”

“Sure.” Qing Shui nodded, he grinned as he spoke. “My answer is positive, even if I wanted to turn down your offer, I simply cannot turn my back to the temptation of science.”

“I need your answer to be more clear.”

“I am joining.” Qing Shui glanced at Zhuo and the pale man beside him, laughed. “And I just don’t think I have a chance to say no in here.”

“Hahaha, well, I never meant to threaten you! My invitation is sincere.” Zhuo waved his left hand in the air for the pale man to go away and he reached out his right arm to Qing Shui. “Welcome to Alpha, the team of elites.”

“My pleasure.”

The hands of two young men were held tightly together.

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## ***16 days later***

At the training field of special forces.

“Mr. Li left us two weeks ago with only a memo stick on the table saying, ‘I am off to research’. I haven’t seen him since then,” Chang complained to Ming Yi while exercising in the temporary training field beside the institute building. “I am worried about him, what if he is in trouble?”

“Mr. Li is much smarter than any of us, what trouble could he run into?” Ming Yi was dressed in a uniform and kept his hands busy by cleaning his pistol. “Now that we have sufficient food, and it is peaceful living in here, everybody is preparing to reconstruct the city! What could possibly happen? What's more, he even used his new connections to get you access to this place.”

“Indeed, but I just feel perturbed since I don't see his face.” Chang got familiar with his pistol fairly quickly. “Although he is kind enough to arrange this, he never showed up to say something but only had someone tell me to learn to use weapons. There are so many! How can I master all of them in such a short period of time?”

“He didn't ask you to master them all but to know how to use them. Isn't that simple?” Ming Yi laughed. “I know it's hard to aim accurately, but it is easy to pull a trigger.”

“I can't disagree.” Chang lowered his head.

He stopped talking and put all his strength in training. He didn't leave the field until sunset. The sun slowly lost its brightness and it was time for Chang to drag his body back to the suite. Jing, as always, was there, waiting for him as he opened the door.

“I am back,” Chang said, leaning heavily against the door and seamlessly shutting out the light from the hallway.

“You are back,” Jing replied in delight but she seemed to have something on her mind.

“Mr. Li just came,” she whispered to Chang. “He seemed flustered as if he was hiding from something. He was here only for less than a minute before leaving a message and disappearing again.”

“What did he say?” Chang felt the tension in the air.

“He asked you to go to his lab, the one you’ve been to, tonight at midnight.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“No but he asked you to hide all traces of yourself so no one would be able to find you,” Jing said. “But you have me with you, I won’t let anyone get close to you.”

“Great.” Chang patted Jing’s soft hair, and they sat together in silence, waiting for the midnight to come.

Their concern made them unsettled. They constantly checked the watch for time -- it was 11:50 PM the last time they looked at the watch.

“Let’s go,” Chang said, opening the door with Jing on his back.

Aided by her, he bypassed groups of patrolling soldiers and arrived in front of the lab at 12:00 AM. Qing Shui was sitting

behind the table, apparently, having been waiting for long.

Chang entered the room with uneasiness, it was his first time seeing Qing Shui in person in the last 16 days.

“You look like you haven’t slept in at least three or four days,” Chang stated, staring at Qing Shui’s tired face. He was still the same person but drained, his eyeballs bloodshot.

“Maybe it is for that long, but that is not important... I just want to ask you one thing today.” Qing Shui gazed at him with his red eyes. “Are you willing to become me? Wait, allow me to put it into different words, do you want to own my best part?”

“Becoming you? What do you mean by owning your best part?” Chang was confused.

“To own my DNA segments.” Qing Shui took out two tiny bottles from his lab coat: one was red and the other green. He raised the red one in front of Chang’s eyes. “Here, it contains my DNA segment, and of course, it is the best of me.”

“And this, you might be wondering.” Qing Shui pointed to the green bottle, “This is what I separated from the red fog, a composition that makes a strong promoter. Even Zhuo hasn’t find it. It significantly improves the success rate of transgene construction. But with all these good things I have talked about, there come risks. The promoter created by this composition can only be used once. That means everyone only has one chance. And the chance of failure... it exists.”

“What if it fails?” Chang asked.

“Death,” Qing Shui answered quietly. “That’s why I thought to ask you if you wanted to own the best part of me.”

“How positive are you of this construction?”

“70% - 90%, I can’t give you the exact percentage,” Qing Shui’s said in a soft voice.

# Chapter 85: Observation

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“70% to 90%?” Chang was cautious about the operation as well. After all, the fatality rate wasn’t neglectable.

“How did you get the number? Do you know its side effects?”

“The number was from my rigorous estimation. As for side effects...” Qing Shui raised his left forearm and rolled up the sleeve, a fresh stitched scar lay on his skin. “You are not my first subject.”

“You did it to yourself?” Chang grabbed Qing Shui’s hand, gazing at the terrible stitch.

“Yes, I tested it on myself.” Qing Shui freed his wrist from Chang’s palm and rolled down his sleeve. “It didn’t feel too bad. And I haven’t find any side effect, temporarily.”

“What about in the future?”

“I don’t feel anything strange now, and I believe that it is unlikely that the procedure will have complications later on. The green liquid you saw is a promoter that is strong enough to place the imported DNA sequence in the correct location in my genome and make sure the imported DNA connects with mine seamlessly.”

“Therefore, you wanted to test it on me. Did you run into some trouble?” Chang asked, sensing Qing Shui’s implication. “If it



wasn't a big trouble, I don't think you would only test it on you and me."

"You got me, indeed, I need your help."

"Even so, you should not risk Chang's life for your experiment!" Jing burst out, letting out her repressed emotions. With her skinny arms raised, she stood in front of Chang, blocking him from Qing Shui. She shouted to him, "Why can't you use someone else? You can even test it on me! I am an EM already, and that should allow the procedure to go smoothly. I don't care what kind of considerations you're taking, I will not let you perform the operation on Chang. Not in front of me!"

"Jing... I guess Mr. Li has his own difficulties. He can't trust anyone in the institute. We are a family, right? You are too young, and I just happen to fit his criteria." Chang hugged Jing tenderly.

However, for the first time Jing refused to accept Chang's explanation. She didn't hug back but raised her head, staring at Qing Shui obstinately. She even started to hate him. "You weren't like this before, you've changed! I thought you were against radical procedures, why are you insisting on this now?"

"I had a difficult time learning that being conservative benefits development, but being radical can eliminate your competition." Qing Shui heaved an unnoticeable sigh. "Aggressiveness will make you more competitive, especially in short term."

"That's your reason for harming people around you?" Jing

continued to interrogate Qing Shui desperately. “You are no different from Zhuo if you insist on doing so!”

Qing Shui’s pupil lost focus for a second. He was dazed by her question. The ponderous silence filled the void in the room, but no one dared to lift it away. Until Qing Shui took a deep breath. His voice was soft when he said, “Perhaps I was never different from him.”

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“Hey... As I said, the biggest difference between Mr. Li and Zhuo is humanity.” Chang’s fingers combed through Jing’s hair. “We went through everything and endure great pain together. If Mr. Li wasn’t compelled by the circumstances, he wouldn’t ask that of me. Do you understand?”

“But...” Jing wasn’t persuaded yet.

“Qing Shui, I’ll take the operation. As long as you don’t make me into a monster, that is.” Chang grinned to Qing Shui. “Do you use anesthetics?”

“For sure, it is a fine operation and I hope you will stay stable.” Qing Shui once again took control of his emotions. “Are you sure? I have told you the consequences.”

“I’ve made up my mind. Without you, I would have died a long time ago, and I am not ready to witness your death while I am alive,” Chang spoke with determination. He lied down on the

operating table and unbuttoned his shirt. “Do it, I hope I can help you.”

“Thank you... Thank you, Chang.” Qing Shui grieved with his eyes closed, his eyeballs trembling behind the thin lids. He took a minute to calm his mind. Then, he turned away to change into scrubs. Sliding his hands into a pair of medical gloves, he came back with a syringe that contained anesthetic.

On the other side, Jing was already tearing up with her eyes as red as a rabbit’s.

“May I leave you some last words?” Fear gradually occupied Chang’s heart as the needle slowly approached to his arm.

“Sure.”

“If... If I don’t make it to the end, please take care of Jing for me. And... my father’s name is Hui Liu, my mother is Hua Wu. If you see them some day, can you take care of them for me as well?” Chang looked to Jing. “Jing... it’s all good, there’s a 70% - 90% success rate, I may come back alive.”

“But...” Jing wiped off her tears, sobbing. Her voice was almost a scream when she said, “I still don’t think you should accept this.”

“Don’t worry, it’s a short operation. Think of the good side, I’ll be as smart as Mr. Li by the time I wake up!” Chang tried to comfort Jing.

“But you will not be the same.”

Jing’s words silenced Chang. Speechless, he decided to close his eyes to avoid answering her.

“Let’s begin, please.” He quit thinking about the changes after the operation and laid on the table quietly. The anesthetic slowly streamed through his veins. The shadowless lamp above him became dimmer and dimmer...

Chang didn’t feel much different after the operation except that he was dizzy.

“”Can you hear me?” Qing Shui sprang up from his chair as he saw Chang’s eyes open shakily.

“...” Chang tried to say something but the effect of the anesthetic dulled his vocal chords.

“Chang!” Qing Shui shouted out his name in excitement.

“What.. time... is it now?”

“3:43 AM, about three and a half hours have passed.” Qing Shui held Chang’s hand with concern. “Do you feel any changes about this world?”

“Changes?” His vision became clearer, the multiple shadows recentering to one. The dizziness vanished as Chang slowly sat up from the table. He saw Jing’s eyes were swollen from crying.

“The sense of distance... it’s so clear to me.” Chang gazed into Jing’s pupils. “I can tell the distance between me and her in millimeters.”

When his feet touched the cold ground, he said, “Every movement I take, it’s more accurate and precise than ever.”

“Your observation and perception has improved,” Qing Shui replied, yet he was hoping for something else. “What else? What else did you feel?”

“What else?” Chang flipped his palm over.

A moment after, he answered, “Nothing else, except for being able to precisely perceive distance.”

“Nothing else? It doesn’t make sense.” Qing Shui frowned, then he took a book from the shelf and rapidly flipped its pages in front of Chang’s eyes, asking, “Do you remember anything?”

“Nope, not even a single word,” Chang answered honestly. “I didn’t even see a single word clearly.”

“You didn’t acquire the ability of information collection and analytical skills from my DNA... except for the perception,” Qing

Shui murmured to himself. “It’s impossible... is intelligence that unreachable?”

“Was I a failure to your experiment?” Chag leaned against the table to support his weak body.

“Well, as least not a 100% success.” While Qing Shui was glad for Chang’s quick recovery, he still felt it was a pity. “I don’t understand why it failed, maybe the brain is just too complicated to understand everything about it.

“I intended to transform you into an EM in the same cognitive category as mine. In this way you could help me defend against Zhuo... But I think the attempt failed.” He then added, “Therefore, I think you guys need to leave here as soon as possible.”

“Why?” Chang was surprised. “Is the conflict already this serious?”

“Yes, it is too dangerous here.” He explained it more by saying, “The structure of the society we live in is facing a rapid revolution, and a revolution simply means massacre.”

“Why? I don’t see why it has anything to do with us.”

“You can name many reasons for this revolution but the main force is the isolation.” Qing Shui avoided Chang’s bright eyes. “As far as I can predict, the communication between cities won’t resume for at least a few years. The transportation is completely

blocked due to the red fog. And once the central has lost control over the cities for too long, the social structure will transform eventually.

“The military and the governments are tempted to take over the control, and besides the authorities, the research institute is also a huge concern. The conflict among the three is endless,” Qing Shui said in calmly. “I am surprised that the society could run smoothly this long. The food shortage was resolved while transportation and communications remained blocked. Eventually, the structure of the society will return to city-state.”

“City-state?” Chang wasn’t too knowledgeable about social structures.

“Yes, a new form of city-state. If not restrained by the central government, a city can be an independent country,” Qing Shui patiently elaborated his thoughts. “The military, the government in each city, and the research institute - they all want to be the kings of a new country. And that’s why Zhuo took control of the food supply by making the Crystal Pea impossible to reproduce for the habitants.

“In the near future, the authorities in this city will combat each other more aggressively than before. It will be more cruel than what happened in the jungle. I was hoping that you could help me if you become the same EM as me, but you didn’t gain the intellectual abilities... Therefore, I am hoping that you’ll withdraw from this war.

“This will be a harsh and brutal combat, and sadly, you aren’t

smart enough to compete with those sly old foxes. You are not valuable for any party and this, of course, leaves unprotected. And they would even use you to threaten me... That's the last thing I want to see. Since the experiment failed, it'd be safer for you to live on your own..."

Apparently Qing Shui had a plan B for everything. He took out an altered handgun from a drawer of his desk.

"Until the revolution settles down, stay away from here. If I am not dead by then, the institute will always be your shelter..." Qing Shui handed the handgun to Chang and hugged him and Jing. "Stay alive, please. Don't let any of Zhuo's men find you."

"..." Chang held Qing Shui tightly. "Stay alive, Qing Shui. But can't you just leave with us?" he asked one last question.

"If I were to go, none of us could leave this institute with our heads attached to our necks." Qing Shui smiled wryly, but at the same time, Chang saw how cold-blooded he could be. "Despite everything, I'm also really curious as to who will become the center of power in Zhengzhou."



## Chapter 86: The Handgun

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“Here are some bullets for the handgun.” Qing Shui handed three boxes of bullets to Chang and then took out and unfolded a silk-like vest from his lab coat. “And this, this is the bulletproof vest fabricated from Group Beta. They utilized those tenacious spider silk we had troubled with and knitted them into this vest. It is the best protection I can offer to you at this moment. It doesn’t affect your flexibility at all and is as lightweight as a T-shirt.”

“You always have a plan B,” Chang noted, taking the white vest and folding it the way Qing Shui had. He then placed it into his pocket.

“I like to give myself some leeway, and there is nothing wrong with it, right?” Qing Shui sank to his knees and gently combed Jing’s hair. “After all, you are the last two family members I have on this planet. I’d do anything to make sure you are safe.”

“Don’t worry, we are stronger than you think. I don’t understand the political struggle but I’ve had a bitter taste of the cruelty of it. So remember, I want to see a living Qing Shui when I come back.” Chang grabbed Jing’s small hand in his palm. “Once the revolution is over, we’ll come back to here regardless of whether you’re dead or alive.”

Qing Shui looked fixedly at Chang, as if this was the last time he would see him. He spoke confidently, “When you’re away, you don’t need to think of me too much. I won’t surrender to anyone. Neither the government nor the military can waste any gifted. The worst case scenario for me is to become a puppet for one of them.

They simply can't afford to lose me.

“And I am positive that no one can scotch me easily, at least not in Zhengzhou.” His eyes were filled with pride. He added, “I’m not easy to be eliminated. To be honest, I’m more concerned about your safety. Part of the reason why I wanted to see you today is because Zhuo has realised you two’s importance to me. So in order to gain control over me, this fox might cage you or something to threaten me. You need to leave, now. I am 100% sure that he will search for you tomorrow. He even has a troop of gene-altered soldiers that no hand-held weapons can do damage to. They are swifter than machines and more deadly than any assassins. The scales on their skin are both genius and evil creation... And hence, I got this handgun from Colonel Xie against a rainy day.”

“Gene-altered soldiers?” Chang frowned, he didn’t know the human subject experiment had gone this far.

“Just as you heard, they are assassins made by Zhuo. Their intelligence is defected, but they’re obedient killing machines.”

“And if we were to quantify how dangerous they are using Jing’s index, what number are they? Can you even cause injury with this handgun?” Knowing that he might be chased after, Chang was extremely alarmed.

“I’d say they are at least at 25, but how high they are depends on what kind of enhancement they had. Zhuo didn’t show me the full set of their skills. I only know that they have excellent vision and every muscle on their body is designed for grappling. They probably don’t know how to survive in the wild but they will make

the most of themselves to fight with medium sized opponents such as humans.”

Qing Shui recalled what he saw the other day in the experimental field, and his finger pointed at Chang’s altered handgun. “The handgun you have here is custom made. It is made specifically to kill these men. It is so powerful among its kind, you may call it the most lethal handgun in the world!

“It was altered by my fellows in Group Beta. Its name was Pfeifer Zeliska Revolver, originating in Austria. The altered version can be held with a single hand. Previously, it wasn’t common to have this handgun used in a battle field because it was too big, and the recoil was too strong to handle. Not many people could use this gun with ease.”

“You said it didn’t prevail in the army? Why?” Chang rubbed the gun’s barrel.

“Because humans were simply too weak before the red fog. The intense recoil could even damage the user’s wrist! Not many soldiers were skilled and strong enough to handle it. However, you don’t need to worry about it now as you are at least six times stronger than an average adult. Firing this gun should be easy enough for you.”

“How powerful is this handgun?” Chang asked, gently touching every inch of this half a meter long gun.

“The instant shooting energy at the muzzle is 6230 joule,” Qing

Shui answered.

“What does that mean?” Chang raised the handgun and tried to aim randomly.

“It is more powerful than any handgun you have known. Even Desert Eagle is much weaker compared to this deadly beast.”

“Do you mean the Desert Eagle we used to play in CS? I remember I always used it for a one-shot kill.”

“Yes... the instant shooting energy at the muzzle of Desert Eagle is 1570 joules. That means Pfeifer Zeliska Revolver is four times more powerful.”

“You’re not kidding, are you?” Chang pulled the cylinder latch to open the cylinder, looking at the giant bullet resting in there. “Since it is such a powerful gun, it should be able to kill those soldiers, right?”

“Even if you fail to kill them, you will cause severe injury with this handgun. If it is a good shot. However, keep this in mind: they are much, much faster than you, and they can see beyond ten meters. In other words, they are stronger than you in all ways except for intelligence. If you were to face them in an unfavorable situation, it’ll be hard for you to hit your target.”

“But with this gun, I’m more confident about surviving out there. Otherwise I won’t even have a chance to escape,” Chang said

and slid the handgun into its holster and carried that on his right shoulder. “Fingers crossed for my aim...”

Qing Shui nodded at them and drew the curtain apart, saying “The Sun is about to rise, you have to go now.”

Chang picked up Jing as he responded, “Qing Shui, take care.”

“So should you.” Qing Shui patted Chang’s shoulder and tilted his head as he teased Jing, laughing. “Are you still mad at me? You don’t seem like you want to say goodbye to me.”

“I don’t want to speak with you! You have changed!” Jing buried her face in Chang’s shoulder.

“Forgive her, she’s still young. I’ll see you around.” The atmosphere was quite awkward at the farewell, and Chang didn’t know how he could sooth it. Therefore, he headed out the door to run away from the heavy atmosphere.

Jing and Chang returned to their suite to pack up some essentials. He also took the wooden box that contained the white worms, as well as his old friend - the crossbow. One last thing he took with was a water bottle. After that, they swiftly and quietly left the room.

Guided by Jing’s detection, they effortlessly found a spot where no one guarded the enclosing wall. Chang looked around again to ensure the route was clear, and then as fast as a flash, he helped

Jing to escape first before jumping off the wall himself. Bathed in the red fog and the darkness, they finally left the center of the storm and headed to their new lives.

Standing on the street, although he carried two heavy weapons on the back and had Jing in his right arm, as well as a small suitcase in the left, he smelled freedom in the air.

“Do you also have a feeling as if we just broke out of jail?” Chang asked Jing.

“I know what you mean, it was depressing in there. Everyone is a schemer.” Jing looked into his eyes. “You don’t belong in there, it was more dangerous for you than living in the jungle.”

“I am aware of that. I’d be a dead ant in there without Qing Shui’s protection.”

“Speaking of him, do you think he is changed?” Jing put her arms around his neck, saying, “I feel strange just being in the same room with him. It wasn’t like this before.”

“I don’t know. I guess it was because we stayed in the institute for too long.” Chang heaved a sigh. “People change, and I am certainly different from the person I was two months ago. Jing, don’t think about this too much. Even if he has changed, he did it for survival. He won’t harm us, just like I will never harm you.”

Jing only closed her arms tightly, nodding.

To ensure their safety, they left the institute, striding away without rest. Zhengzhou was as sincere and calm as a sleeping baby except for some rasping sounds from unnamed insects and birds. There was not a single human to be seen at night.

The night was always more intimidating—the limited vision and circadian rhythm refrained humans from being active at night.

They didn't encounter anyone while walking on the pavement covered by various plants. Chang wasn't familiar with Zhengzhou either. He only knew that he should stay as far away from the institute as possible. Therefore, he headed to the south, then to the east.

The institute was at the north of Zhengzhou, and there was a residential area at the east side. Aided by Jing's powers, they bypassed major predators without getting their attention.

When the sun was about to show its bright face, they arrived at the east side.

“Let's find a place around here.” Chang had a feeling that if they continued to head east, they would enter the jungle before they knew it. Besides, Jing also reminded him that the concentration of living organisms decreased ahead. Thus, Chang walked around the two blocks until he found a suitable empty condo building. He opened a room to the first floor and went inside with Jing.

“We'll stay in here today. I'll find a better place when we have

time to...”

The trace of human living was gone from the room. Only the furniture was left covered by dust.

Chang removed all his luggage, and then sat down on a sofa bed. “I just need some rest...” he murmured feebly and fell on the side. He wasn’t exhausted but his mind was fatigued from the farewell and the operation.

Jing stood up and walked across the living room to lock the door. She then returned and quietly laid down beside him.

They slept peacefully until a few hours later a series of sharp noises woke Chang up from dreaming.

Someone was drumming against a frying pan with a metal ladle. The sound was grating on the ears and it was especially unbearable for Chang due to his hearing being made more sensitive by the operation. He almost bounced up from the sofa bed, and his movements woke Jing up.

“What is going on?”

The world was dyed in bright red already. His watch indicated the time - 10:43 AM.



## Chapter 87: Someone From The Past

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“All people in the residential area come here!” came a middle-aged woman’s loud voice after the drumming’s echo died down.

Chang bent over the window, looking down. He vaguely saw the situation—countless shadows were converging, rallied by the woman.

“What is happening, Chang?” Jing also leaned beside Chang and looked at the situation. However, she couldn’t see anything except for the red fog that was clouding her vision.

“It must be a gathering or something. We’ve seen autonomic groups spreading around the city, so I guess they’re giving a speech over there.” Chang opened the window widely and carefully listened to the hubbub.

As expected, a voice of a man spoke up when the woman was done gathering the inhabitants in this area.

The speech was hard to hear as the gathering spot was far away from his shelter. However, from the faint syllables that reached him, he understood that it was a talk of work distribution. Everyone in this community was in charge of some task; some focused on cultivating plants while the others were occupied with collecting. It seemed like no one was living independent to this group.

Chang didn’t gather any information that he found interesting

through all his listening. Besides, he was eluding the institute at this moment, so the less exposure he got, the better. Thinking that, he closed the window.

Having done so, the two of them rested on the sofa. Later, when Chang took the wooden box, planning to go out to feed the worms, a series of clear footsteps echoed through the corridor.

“Someone’s coming,” he whispered and hinted for Jing to hide behind the sofa. Chang placed the wooden box at the other end of it, then removed the crossbow from his back. In the static silence, he loaded the crossbow and pointed it at the door.

A man with an officer’s baton opened the door when Chang just finished his preparations.

“Hello? I’ve heard something just now,” the man shouted out warily upon opening the door. But he didn’t enter.

Hiding behind the sofa, Chang glanced at the nervous man whose armband was labelled “Shunhe Garden Community Guards”. The title was easy to identify with his outstanding vision.

Chang loosened his guard when he saw those words. “Shunhe Garden” was the name of the community he was located in now. He’d seen the sign when he entered the residential area. The guard who stood at the door should be the armed force of this autonomic group.

Carefully putting down the crossbow on the back of the sofa, Chang stood up from his hiding spot.

“I am here, but I just happened to pass by this community.”

The guard’s grip on the baton tightened when his uncertainty was confirmed. He raised his arm so that the baton was placed at a position, which made attacking the easiest, and walked into the room with hesitation.

“Relax. I have no bad intentions.” Chang raised both of his hands in the air. “I am just passing through here.”

“I see.” The man came closer to Chang, whose gesture slightly loosened the guard’s nerves. He then asked, “Where did you come from? I hope you will answer this question honestly. The world is chaotic as many menacing groups are actively stealing resources from other communities. Ours is harmonic and self-sufficient, and we’d like to keep it this way.”

“I understand what you mean.” Chang pulled up Jing from behind the sofa, saying, “We came from the Jin Shui district to look for our relatives. This is my younger sister here.”

“I see.” The guard relaxed from his tensed state after seeing Jing. After all, a person intending to do harm would never have a girl who looked to be about 10-years-old come along with him, as a young kid was likely to be a burden along the way.

“So you’re just passing by here, huh? Are you planning to leave today, or are you going to stay for awhile?”

“We wanted to stay here for sometime to look for our relatives,” Chang said in consideration. “It doesn’t mean we want anything from you. We just want to settle down in here temporarily since I heard that our relatives live around here. This way, we may eventually find them.”

“Okay... If you want to stay here for longer than a few days, you have to come with me to register your information. We’ll also need to confirm your identity.” The guard still had the baton in hand, saying, “We don’t usually expel peaceful outsiders from our community, instead, we like to have them stay as absorbing newcomers strengthens the community bond. But first, I need you to register with us, and I’ll introduce to you some core members.”

“I understand, this is what should be done,” Chang agreed, holding Jing’s hand, and slowly approached the guard.

“All right, come with me. But we’ll need to walk for a bit.” The guard turned around as now he was sure that Chang was harmless.

They left the building and came onto the street.

The guard led them to the community’s Property Management office, and pointed at the building with his baton. “Here we are.”

“I see.” Chang nodded while tilting his head to the back to see the

whole building.

The three entered it and soon saw a stout middle-aged woman and a thin woman who was busy with the paperwork.

Chang was stunned when he saw the thin woman. “Dr. Huang...” The name slipped out from his lips without him consciously saying it.

The woman looked up in surprise when the familiar voice broke the air. She was dazed by seeing the two familiar faces in front of her.

“It is you!” Doctor Huang was confused when she raised her head. “Why are you here?”

“Just came here by accident.” Dr. Hunag was someone that he had known from Kaifeng, and Chang was overwhelmed with emotion. “You managed to escape from the jungle! Everybody thought you must have died!”

“I am lucky to still be alive. Since I was separated from the troop, I ran disorientedly. A millipede was chasing after me and another soldier before we took our own way. The millipede seemed to have more interest in him than me, and that’s how I fled and ended up in here.” Dr. Huang was soaked in cold sweat when she recalled that day in jungle.

While they were speaking, the guard and the stout woman looked

to Dr. Huang at the same time.

“Yin, do you know him?”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“Who is he?”

“He is a relative of mine to some extent.” Doctor Huang looked at Chang.

“Okay. I have no other concerns now. I didn’t truly trust him when he said he came down here to look for his relatives.” The guard put away the weapon as he received the confirmation from Dr. Huang. “Now that I know you guys are acquaintances, I shall leave you some free time for the reunion. I’ll be patrolling on the street.”

“This sounds like a good news.” The stout woman nodded, ready to leave as well. “I am leaving the room to you, good to see you have someone from your family come. Take your time.”

The room was left to the three as the guard and the woman left the office.

“Have a seat.” Dr. Huang pointed at the stools beside her and stood up. “I’ll get you a glass of water.”

“Thank you.” Chang sat on the stool with Jing sat on his knees. He asked, “How did you get here? We waited for a long time when we went out of the jungle, but we didn’t see you escaping.”

“Yeah, I went the other way. Plus, I didn’t want to go with you guys, either. Therefore, when I fled from the jungle, I came here by simply going along one of the avenues.” Dr. Huang placed the glass in front of Chang. “I just didn’t expect that Qing Shui wouldn’t let go of me even if I hid in here. Have you come to take me away?”

“No, not at all. We ended up here by accident,” Chang explained, waving away Dr. Huang’s misunderstanding. “We were just separated from him and happened to settle down in here.”

“Are you kidding me? It doesn’t make sense. Although I’ve never been to the Jinshui District, the rumors have been flying around, and from them I’ve got a sense of how powerful the research institute is. Qing Shui is smart, and I don’t think he’d be treated badly, nor would you. Why? What makes you run from all the comfort to a slum like here?”

“To be honest, I don’t know how to explain the reason to you. I can only tell you that there is an intense political struggle in the research institute, and I think staying in there won’t be safe anymore.” Chang smirked, saying, “Please, don’t denounce us again.”

“Hahaha, I don’t see a point for doing that again. I didn’t know you guys that well when I was in Kaifeng. Looking back, I was terrified and hence made that regretful decision.” Dr. Huang’s face

revealed a sense of relief as she smiled. “I thought Qing Shui planned to murder me when he got me into the jungle. So I was astounded when he actually took care of me, and that’s when I started to sense that he had a good heart. Now I understand that he wanted me to be safe when he forced me to leave the military base in Kaifeng.”

“You would know he isn’t a conspiracist at all if you were willing to leave behind your prejudices about him and get to know him earlier. He is kind but he protects himself with cold-heartedness. And it is the only personality you will perceive if you keep on not letting yourself to know him.” Chang made a quick nod. “Let’s talk about you now. You seem to have a decent life here, you even got a job in the management office.”

“Everybody is nice to me here.” Dr. Huang seemed much happier than when she was in Kaifeng. She even became talkative. Chang thought that the stable life provided by the community must have made her return to her natural state.

“When I got out of the jungle, I didn’t run far away from it but stayed here under an alias. I happened to treat a patient’s injury using my skills, and that’s how they accepted me.

“And because I am a doctor, I am needed on a daily basis. Even though I don’t have medical equipment with me, I am still able to treat some common diseases. As you’ve seen already, getting injured or poisoned is not rare anymore. Evreyone treats me well because I can save lives. And when I’m not on medical duty, I work as a receptionist and bookkeeper. In this way, I utilize all my skills to keep the community running.”



“That sounds great. Can Jing and I stay here for sometime? I can be a security guard,” Chang said. “You know my abilities already.”

“Of course! I will let them know later. The only thing you need to do is to register your name on the list.” Dr. Huang pulled out a binder from the shelf. “You are lucky that I work here, otherwise they will need to examine your background thoroughly.”

“Is it that disordered around here?” Chang was curious from Dr. Huang’s tone.

“It is not only disorder but also violence. It can be seen wherever you go. Without law enforcement, scuffles, homicide and rape are happening under the sunlight all the time. A lot of groups are fighting for the Crystal Pea seeds periodically distributed by the military. Remember how we used to have the military force to discipline the citizens back in Zhengzhou?

“The situation is completely different here since the military ran out of food reserves long time ago. No one listened to them when they stopped handing out food, and now the only thing the military does is to distribute the seeds on a daily basis. They leave the distribution station as soon as the seeds run out. They just don’t care about us anymore. Every single inhabitant here is fighting over the tiniest issue, and the nature keeps on bringing new pressure, straining everyone’s conscience with every new immoral thing they have to do to survive. You probably don’t feel it at this moment, but you will know what I am talking about after staying for a bit longer...”

## Chapter 88: Gangs

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“We’ll see.” Chang nodded. “We survived through the deadly evolution period. Can this be any worse than that?”

“Of course it’s not as bad as that.” Dr. Huang smiled slightly. She was reminded of her parents when Chang mentioned the Deadly Evolution, and Chang recalled his own, too.

“Well then, let’s complete the registration so we can stay here long term.”

“Sure.” Dr. Huang handed him a pen and the registration binder.

After they did it, Dr. Huang introduced them to the staff members as well as helped Chang collect his armband from the security office.

“Welcome to the security team! From now on, you are a security guard in our community. We usually patrol the grounds by ourselves and only gather when a problem too large for a single guard to solve arises.” The person who introduced Chang to the security team was the guard he met in the abandoned apartment. “I saw your name on the list already, you are Chang Liu, aren’t you? We have the same last name. I am Rui Liu, nice to meet you.”

“Mr. Liu, nice to meet you, too.” Chang bowed to Rui.

“I am only a few years older than you, just call me Rui, please.”

The man seemed to have an even-tempered personality.

“Rui.”

“Today is your first day at work, so I should show you around the community before you begin patrolling on your own. I think some people are out food searching at this time, and some are busy with their own business. It’s rather peaceful at this moment, so I’ll guide you and your sister to the landscapes,” Rui said, waving to Dr. Huang as he left the office with Qing Shui and Jing. “See you later.”

The three roamed around the streets and chatted casually to get to know each other.

“Chang, what are you carrying on your back?” Rui asked, starting the conversation by mentioning the object that he was curious about. “I wanted to ask about it when first I saw you. It doesn’t look like a gun since the size is quite big. What is it exactly? Your secret weapon or something?”

“It’s a handgun,” Chang answered with a smile.

“No way is it a handgun! I’ve never seen anything like this before. It has the shape of a gun but the length made me suspect that it might be an assault rifle. Is it like a model gun or something?” Rui patted the holster curiously. “Oh... It’s made out of metal, is it heavy?”

“Not too weighty, at least it’s not bothering my movement.”

“Well, if it’s as solid as it looks like, it can be used as a baton as well,” Rui joked.

Chang caught his drift. “Of course, the impact received after swinging it is no laughing matter.”

“Chang, I heard that you are planning to live with us for long term, is it true?”

“It is, at least for a few weeks.”

“I see. In this case, I think it’s necessary to tell you more about the circumstances around here.”

“Thank you, Rui,” Chang said, eager to hear more about his place.

“No worries. After all, we now have to look after each other. I’ll show you our fields for growing the Crystal Pea.” While speaking, Rui led Chang to the center of the residential area. It was supposed to be a nice central garden encircled by apartment buildings, but the residents cultivated the meadow into farmland. As expected, the only relief grain they were growing was the Crystal Pea, whose seeds were distributed by the military.

“These are the fields where we always have guards watch for thieves.” Rui squatted, rubbing a leaf. “The pea matures in seven

days, and generally, it rots slower than other plants and meat. But even though its resistance to bacteria growth is slightly better, it still cannot be stored overnight.” Rui had mixed feelings when gazing at the thriving plant. “However, you cannot replant the pea that you harvested. Its seed is only available from the official distribution. Otherwise we would no longer need to worry about food.”

“That’s interesting... An irreproducible crop.” Chang stripped a pod, revealing the transparent pea.

“We tried, but they didn’t germinate at all. The explanation they gave us was that this transgenic crop has irreparable DNA breakage and that’s the cost of making it... I really don’t understand what this means, besides that we have to line up for the daily seed distribution”

“I see... So our living still relies on the authorities,” Chang muttered to himself.

“We’re also terrorized by gangs, unfortunately.”

“Gangs?” Chang burst into laughter. “What gangs?”

“You don’t know they exist, do you?”

“I don’t know about them at all. I’ve only seen them on TV, but not in real life,” Chang explained with honesty.

“This is unbelievable! I’ve no idea what kind of life you were living before... It’s as if you were sheltered from the outside world! These kind of gangs are all over the place. There is around one in every block, and they heavily rely on us for a living.” Rui was startled by Chang’s response, but he kept on explaining patiently, “I don’t know if you’ve heard about the Hong Kong Triad Society back in the 90s, but these gangs are mimicking the infamous gang. They pressured us into paying a part of our harvest for protection. The way it works is this - the gang collects the seeds, and so do we. But they don’t do the farming, instead forcing us to do all the manual labor. Then we have to return their harvest, as well as occasionally providing something else, such as extra peas or... girls. Of course, by doing so, we’re almost free from the scuffles and robbery of other gangs. And this is how they survive in this area.”

“I don’t understand. We have our own security team, why do we listen to them obediently?” Chang asked, puzzled.

“Look at us, our community is made up of people in their 30s, and most of us have kids. We are impotent against these young people. As much as I saw, the majority of the young adults choose to form or join a gang. They’re impulsive and aggressive. Some even have firearms. My point is, if they weren’t backed by their youth and weapons, who would listen to them?” Rui laughed reluctantly. “At the end of the day, the cost of provoking them isn’t affordable to us.”

“Makes sense.” Chang nodded.

“If you’re still in doubt, just come with me at dusk. They’re

collecting the harvest every day around that time,” Rui added.

“Sure, I’m curious to be honest.”

Chang and Jing bowed to Rui to show their appreciation, and then went their own way. During the day, Chang didn’t encounter anything unusual except for having to rescue a girl from a homeless man who was attempting to rape her. He broke the man’s leg before leaving the scene.

The time slipped by quickly, and the dusk arrived.

The farmers harvested the matured Crystal Pea and sowed the new seeds in their place. They removed the pods and filled containers of different shapes and sizes with this transparent pea.

As if it was a ritual, the inhabitants who searched for food in the city returned to their nest at dusk. The gang also appeared on time, coming from the other side of the street. Its people were yelling, howling with laughter and swinging their weapons about.

## Chapter 89: We All Have Intentions

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As if it was an unwritten rule, the majority of the inhabitants awaited the arrival of the gangster quietly. The leading members even prepared the portion of the Crystal Pea that was to be handed over to the gangster.

“Fifteen kilograms of the Crystal Pea, you can have it weighed on the scale.” The leading member was the stout woman he saw in the office. She handed the container to a man who held a semi-automatic rifle.

“Why do they have firearms?” Witnessing the process so far, Chang turned his head, asking Rui.

“You can see them with guns from here?” Rui was perplexed, standing in the crowd.

“I guessed, the shadow seem like guns.” Chang answered ambiguously, adding, “Why do they have guns? I thought only the military have them.”

“It’s because they have connections in the military.” Rui dropped his question about Chang’s unusual vision. “The military would have confiscated them if they were not shielded.”

“I see.”

The gang didn’t leave yet as the man checked the container. He



pushed the three girls who the gang had taken away before to the stout woman.

“These cuties are from your community, aren’t they?” The leading gangster was a muscular man with tattoos covering his body, and it was him, who carried a semi-automatic rifle. “Our people are done using them, so we’re returning them to you. We don’t have extra food to keep them around.”

The leader commanded the inhabitants to line up in two rows and looked at their faces one by one.

“I’ve returned your girls scot-free! I kept my promise already. Don’t hate me on this, this is the way the world should be.” The two lines slowly formed as the leader ordered them to do so. He tilted his head to hint for another three gangsters to come from the gang and examine these inhabitants’ faces. “Let’s search for some beauties.”

As the tattooed man ordered, the gangsters scanned and examined the inhabitants one by one. If they found a young woman, they would size her up to check her face and body. If it was a man, what they did most of the time was just to glance, unless what they carried intrigued the examining gangster.

Chang was unfortunate that his handgun gathered interest.

“What is that thing on your shoulder? I can’t tell if it’s a gun or bazooka.” It was the leader who checked Chang, his finger slightly moving away from its usual place on the holster. “I want to see it,

take it off!”

“This is a fake gun, there is no point for you to waste time on it.” Rui cut into the conversation before Chang could explain.

“Who the f\*ck are you? Go away.” The leader goggled at Rui then stared at Chang again. “I said take it off!”

“...” Brows knotted, Chang refused to move even an inch. The handgun was his last chance of survival if the gene-altered soldiers ever found him, he simply couldn’t give it up.

However, if he didn’t give away his handgun now, an argument could easily start between him and the gang. If it came to that, they would be tangled in a bout of fierce fighting. Although he knew that these autonomic groups were nothing to be afraid of, but since they had connections with the military, it might get involved if he killed any of them.

The consequences of attracting military’s attention was obvious - he might once again be spotted by Zhuo. In this critical moment, he didn’t want to cause trouble for Qing Shui.

Thus, after weighting the advantages against the disadvantages, Chang decided to turn in his handgun to the gang leader.

It was at the exact moment he made a decision when the leader lost his patience. Perhaps he was irritated by the fact that his scouting didn’t work well, and that made him feel disgraced. He

lifted his right leg, kicking at Chang's stomach.

Chang clearly saw the leader's each move as if the gangster kicked in slow motion. Every inch of the motion's curve was captured by his eyes, and the information entered his brain through the retina. The world seemed static to him in this second. He could predict when and where the foot would go up and down. It was all clear as day to him.

In a blink of an eye, Chang already knew what posture he should use to receive this attack and at the same time how to kill this person in the most effortless way. He even had ample time in that brief moment to assess how he could avoid the blood splashing on him by having the dagger on his waist prick on his neck out of instinct.

This was Qing Shui's ability - micro observation, rapidly using analytical skills and observation to cope with an attack while preparing for a precise counter-attack.

This wasn't a real fighting technique but more practical than any move. In combat, it was all about strategy. However, humans weren't computers. They couldn't make the best moves by calculation. The only way of improving strategic planning was through repetitive practice so that it became an instinct.

Qing Shui's ability was different. He could employ a big part of his frontal cortex into rapid calculation. He wasn't a super computer, but he was stronger than any calculation machine when in crisis.

Chang was gifted this ability from the transgene operation. Therefore, he calmly waited for the foot's impact with his stomach, even though he could kill the man in a flash.

Chang was thrown to the ground, but it wasn't painful at all. He didn't even feel that the leader's kick held any power. If he didn't act deliberately, the kick couldn't have thrown him on the ground. Chang decided to finish his act and wrinkled his face as if he had suffered from the impact.

"Please, I'll give it to you." Chang pressed on his stomach with one hand and removed the handgun from his shoulder. He pushed it forward to show his submission.

Picking up the handgun, the leader realized it was unusually heavy. His face betrayed his astonishment.

"It's a real gun, huh?" The leader flipped the cover of the holster to check the mechanics. He was extatic when he realized he'd found a jackpot. The handgun was pointed to Chang's face, and the man smirked. "An alteration, isn't it? Feels nice in my hand. Where did you get it, little bastard?"

Chang didn't dare to loosen his guard as the muzzle was pointing right at his face and thought up an excuse. "I found it on a corpse."

"I see," the leader murmured, distracted by the giant bullets in the cylinder. After a bit, he casually asked, "I am taking this beauty away, what do you think?"

“Nothing that I want to say.” Chang shook his head innocently. “It is the rule that I must comply with.”

“Good.” The leader laughed, happy with his harvest, while pulling Chang up from the ground. He carried the handgun the way Chang had, on his shoulder. The leader seemed overly delighted when he dusted off the mud from Chang’s shirt. He moved to the next person afterward.

Every witness, including Rui, had pity painted on their faces.

Among the crowd, there were only two people remaining calm, and both of them knew Chang - Dr. Huang and Jing.

They didn’t feel pity for the lost gun but the gangster.

The brief disturbance settled since no fight had happened. The people might even forgot about it in a few hours.

At night, in the dining room where the community workers had dinner.

Dr. Huang walked away from the counter with two bowls of the steamed Crystal Pea in hand. She sat down beside Chang, handing him one of the bowls. “This is your serving.”

“Thank you, Dr. Huang.” Chang held up his hand to stop the

bowl in the air. “You can have mine.”

“Wow, I didn’t know you were one of those rebels who are against the Crystal Pea.” Dr. Huang poured the Crystal Pea to one bowl, shrugging at his refused kindness. “What about Jing?”

“We have our own food,” Chang replied.

“Well then, I’ll have yours. I am a simple person, and treat each day as a gift, feeling lucky for simply having the pleasure of waking up in the morning. I am pretty carefree in this mentality.” Dr. Huang knocked the bowl with her spoon. “Are you sure? A serving is only about 100 grams, I absolutely don’t mind having more.”

“Go ahead.” Chang nodded assently with his lips pressed firmly together.

He didn’t speak anything until Dr. Huang finished her meal.

“When are you going?” Dr. Huang asked, breaking the ice. She placed her unwashed bowl and utensils on the shelf.

“When everyone is asleep.” Chang stood up and leaned against a corner. “Do you think I’ll be suspected if I do it?”

“Nope,” Dr. Huang asserted categorically. “You thought your conflict between you and the gangster was severe? You must have not seen how often this occurs. They are a notorious gang, they kill people. They have foes everywhere to chase after them, who would

think of you?”

“I am happy to hear that.” Chang waved to Jing to ask her to come over. “We need to get some rest first.”

“Alright, I’ll be waiting for your good news.” Dr. Huang left the room as she saw Chang close his eyelids.

At the same time but different location - the research institute wasn’t peaceful, either.

“Qing Shui! I haven’t seen your family for quite a while, where are they hanging out?” Zhuo pretended to ask inadvertently while shaking the testing tube in his hand.

“Well, I didn’t want them to get involved with the ugly political turmoil, so I already sent them to somewhere peaceful.” Speaking emotionlessly, Qing Shui poked a needle into an experimental subject’s arm. “I can’t even guarantee my own safety here, so if I have a misfortune, they will suffer with me. Thus, I’ve sent them very far away from here.”

“Oh come on! Who would dare to harm them? You’re working with me now! We’re on the same boat, you have my word.” Zhuo laughed. “You don’t trust me, do you?”

“It’s not about trust, I just want them to live happier.” Qing Shui beamed. “I’m loyal to Group Alpha.”

“Oh Qing Shui, I just love to hear what you’ve just said.” Zhuo nodded, grinning. His words were cut off by a series of knocks on the door.

“Let me check who that is, I think it’s someone from the military.” Zhuo put down his test tube on the lab racks and turned to the door.

It was a senior captain. The young man kindly invited Zhuo to an empty room. The lights flickered as they struggled to turn on.

“Did you find that person?” Abnormally, Zhuo wasn’t smiling.

“Yes, we did. An olfactory EM. Her nose is much more sensitive than a dog’s.” The senior captain smiled with confidence. “You only need an object that was used by your target, and she can trace it down as long as he is still in Zhengzhou!”

“Good, I’ll send a troop with the woman.” Zhuo revealed his bloodthirstiness. “This is a class-A mission, and there are two targets - a boy and a little girl. I need them back here as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Sir!” The senior captain gave a salute.

“One more thing, the first approach is to kindly ask them to come with the troop. But if they refuse, you know what to do next.” Zhuo once again put on the smile that he only showed to Qing Shui. “And keep it low key. I don’t want anyone outside of the



mission to know about this. They are my last weapons. Most importantly, they must be alive when they come here. I don't care if they have some body parts missing or not, but if they die, it's meaningless to bring them back, understood?"

"Understood!" The senior captain nodded.

"Alright, your path in the military will be quick and easy when you get this done. Time waits for no one, you should go now." Patting the senior captain's shoulder, Zhuo left the room with his gentle smile and returned to his lab.

# Chapter 90: Quadruple Kill

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2:00 A.M

His eyes sprang open. Supporting his body with his arms, Chang sat up and leaned his back against the wall. He rubbed his temple to relieve the growing headache.

Jing was woken up by Chang's movement as he sat up.

“Chang, are you leaving for the handgun?”

“I am. It's critical for us since it's the only effective tool in defending against the gene-altered soldiers.” He dusted off the mud from his pants, then saw a slip of a note pinned under a table leg.

The note was so close to him that he could retrieve it by reaching out his arm. It was obvious that someone had purposefully left it for him. He lifted the table and drew that piece of paper inked with a graceful script.

The content was a simple line “The gang resides in the townhouses near our community”. There was a simplified line map drawing below the sentence. Its every stroke disclosed the details he needed.

Chang ripped the note twice and threw it in the garbage can. He said, “I'll be back in a moment.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” Jing queried.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to the jungle but a townhouse nearby. There aren’t many dangers there that I can’t handle. I’m just taking my handgun back, I’ve no plan on killing them.”

“But... don’t you think your goal is too obvious to expose you?” Jing was baffled.

“I will make a robbery scene. Although I’ve never done this before, I can mimic what I saw on TV. Nothing you need to worry about.” Chang patted Jing on her back before he left the room.

Chang didn’t leave for the townhouse right away, instead, he returned to the apartment where Jing and he first hid in. His crossbow was untouched and was still placed behind the sofa. Picking it up, he then removed his shirt and put on the silk vest. He found a long-sleeved black t-shirt in a forsaken wardrobe and wrapped his head with a navy scarf that left only his eyes exposed. The daggers were secured to his belt, and the crossbow was loaded. After double-checking everything, he was now fully prepared for his stealthy trespass.

Returning outside, Chang realized that one thing that never changed was the stridulation of insects. Their song used to accompany his innocent childhood, but the good old days were already gone. The same old song that the insects were performing would now become a paeon for his imminent triumph.

Without having Jing around him, he was able to run at full speed. Upon nightfall, the darkness flooded the city, and Chang weaved through the overwhelming fog. He was very quick, his every step being the most energy efficient possible. The balls of his feet always avoided debris and deadwood that might reduce his speed.

As if he was a born runner, sprinting had become as effortless and instinctive as breathing. Even though he didn't gain much strength, his feet pounded the street in such a natural way that was akin to a cheetah racing through verdant meadows. The improvement on analytic skills and perception had turned him into an astute runner. Both his endurance and speed were enhanced by efficiency.

Chang relished at the silent calculations in his mind. In less than two minutes, the area that had neatly organized townhouses was in front of him. He stopped as he had a feeling that his destination was close-by.

Tracing the map in his mind, he found the particular townhouse with ease. It stood out from the rest, which seemed lifeless in comparison.

Except for the institute, none of the residential areas had electricity supply. Regardless of what kind of housing it was, a mansion or a hut, electricity was not provided to citizens.

Chang approached the townhouse with agility. Dirty shoes

messily laid outside the door, and the stink of excretion that infected the air, affirmed him that this townhouse was his target.

All of these unmistakable hints gave Chang a direction, and he lurked under a window like a civet cat.

The window on the second floor was blocked by a locked cage-like security fence, and the burglar proof door below was tightly shut.

It was common for people to lock entrances to their houses before going to sleep. As a gang, these people even had thugs sleep in the living room as night guards—they were ready for reprisal from other gangs at any time.

Climbing up the fence to the second floor, Chang hung himself upside down as he reached out to pull apart the thinnest two bars in one breath. He squeezed into the iron cage and slammed against the window with his greatest force. He rolled on the ground to protect his head as he entered the townhouse.

Bang!

The glass shattered, and Chang stood up among the broken shards.

Of course, the break-in awoke everyone inside.

The townhouse was quite big, divided into three floors. The first

contained the living room where most of the thugs slept in. This was also a reason why Chang decided to infiltrate through the second floor. He crashed into a bedroom with only four men and one woman snoring on a king-sized bed. All of them were shirtless.

The woman screamed immediately upon seeing a black shadow. The rest were shocked as well, but they were more experienced in combat. Out of instinct, they reached for their weapons.

Leaping with light feet, Chang landed in the center of the bed. He swiftly pulled out a dagger and swung it with the suddenness of a thunder bolt. The tip of the dagger made an elegant curve which slid through these men's air tubes and arteries. The action itself was dexterous yet aesthetic.

As the blade left the last man's neck, blood gushed out from the arteries as if four fountains were installed on the bed. However, not even a single drop of blood sprinkled on Chang, the culprit of this bloody scene.

The woman was showered in blood, the red liquid soaking into her hair and coating her naked body. She shrieked louder with tears in her eyes, the sudden death of others stiffening her body. She even lost control of her bladder, the excretion staining the bed sheet immediately.

"I'll give you three seconds to stop crying, otherwise you'll be the same as them." Brows knitted, Chang clogged her tears by screaming out that one sentence. He spoke again after two seconds. "Three questions, how many people do they have in the gang? How many guns do they own? And where is the gangleader?"

“The leader is on... on the third floor. I don’t know how many guns they have, but they have sixty to seventy members, I guess...” she uttered, her hands laced around her head. “Please, please don’t kill me, I was forced to be here, I didn’t do anything bad...”

The woman didn’t even dare to look at Chang, keeping her head low and pleading for her life in a loud voice. But when she raised her head again, the man in black was already gone.

Unlocking the bedroom door, Chang ran up the stairs like the wind. In his mind, his true enemies were those who had guns. Therefore, after confirming the gang leader’s location from the woman, he didn’t waste time on purging the hooligans since his goal was his handgun that was taken away by the leader.

The uproar lit up the townhouse when the window was shattered and the woman shrieked. He heard rustling sounds of doors opening and footsteps on their way to the third floor. The sounds of metal reminded Chang that some of the hooligans were equipped with knives.

However, the chaos didn’t hold him back. Because in this darkness filled with red fog, those “Blinds”, who could only see two meters ahead of themselves, were not a threat to him.

# Chapter 91: Decisive

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It was a short trip for Chang to run up one set of stairs. The top floor of this townhouse was more spacious compared to the lower levels, and Chang assumed this was the gang leader's hideout.

Awakened by the sudden turmoil, the people who were sleeping on commodious leather sofas sat up. They already had weapons in their hands, and one of them was even struggling with turning on a flashlight.

There were eight gangsters residing in this lounge, two of them equipped with pistols. The flashlight they had was nothing special. It was a household type. Seeing the whole situation, Chang swiftly sneaked into a corner without a second thought. A bolt ejected quietly from the crossbow, aimed at its fated destination. It effortlessly penetrated through the chest of the man who was fumbling with flicking on the flashlight's switch.

At this moment, Chang was deaf to any screams. The flashlight dropped from an enfeebled hand and rolled in a short curve before stopping. A faint and lonely light illuminated the surrounding red fog.

The rest of the gangsters recoiled out of instinct. They then moved to stand back to back, forming a circle to defend against the unseen threat.

“What gang are you...” one man shouted to the air.



The poor man wasn't given a chance to finish his sentence. Chang was stingy with time. He just wanted to get his handgun back as soon as possible. Therefore, the second bolt he fired perforated the man's throat, bringing him and his question to the grave. The man's handgun dropped as he kneeled to the ground.

Chang's first unexpected attack didn't leave the gangsters too much time to attack, but from the second one, the mechanic sound of the trigger left them an auditory hint. The only man in the room who held a firearm hastily turned to the source of the sound and without hesitation fired four or five times. The muzzle gave out lights from the combustion yet the dark corner only returned the noise of bullets hitting against the wall, mocking him that he was off target.

"I didn't get him." The shooting person was agitated by his own failure. He was only able to look around in terror.

A coldness of the blade informed the man about his fate.

The dagger performed just as well as when Chang had killed the four men. The process was as smooth as a hot blade sliding into butter. Chang ran to the other man once the one before him collapsed.

Clearing out the path didn't take long. He made a ninety degree turn to the door before the bodies even stopped twitching. He knew his final destination, the master bedroom.

Perhaps because Chang wasn't challenged at all in killing all

these hooligans, he was overconfident and carelessly kicked the door open, only for a series of malicious bullets to be shot from an assault rifle to welcome his arrival.

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The wily gang leader had awaited Chang for a long time. He hid behind the door so that his prey would come to him. As soon as the door opened, he pulled the trigger to release the raging bullets.

At the same time, as Chang kicked open the fragile door, he noticed the firing muzzle. His brain performed automatic calculations before he was even aware of it.

Although he didn't see the trajectory of the bullets, his brain mapped out an imagery simulation based on the sparks he saw from the rifle. He predicted that there will be seventeen bullets fired before he could dodge to the side. He also judged from the frequency of the gang leader's arm shaking that six out of seventeen bullets would hit him, and their exact location on his body.

Thus, he made a dodge before it was too late.

His thigh muscles contracted, and he lowered his head, bending down. He then took a leap to get away from the door. Five out of six bullets continued on their journey to the far end but he barely had time to evade the last one. It edged by the side of his waist, the abrasion emitting a blazing heat.

Just as the eighteenth bullet left the muzzle, Chang rolled to the side so that he was out of the shooting range. His palm covered the bleeding wound, which was burning painfully.

“I was too careless...” Chang was soaked in cold sweat when he managed to hide beside the door. He clearly understood that a man who might be ten times weaker than him could still easily kill him.

In this moment, he was reminded of the millipede which was blown up by the bazooka. It was possible for a level one human to slay a formidable organism with fine calculations and enough luck. Without the protection of the spider silk bulletproof vest, the last gunshot could have been a fatal wound.

Upon realising the cruel fact, Chang became more lucid and careful about the situation he was confronted with.

It all happened in a flash, the holligan guards from the first floor arrived in a fluster. Before the gangsters noticed him, Chang sprang up and gripped onto the lighting crown molding and rested his feet against the wall as if he was a gecko.

“Who is it? Who attacked us?” The hooligans had nothing but flashlights and wooden rods in their hands. The light restlessly swung around, illuminating the red fog.

Chang carefully moved along the lighting crown molding, backed by the fine calculations in his mind. None of the light beams spotted him.

Lurking in the corner, Chang hung himself upside down to free his hands so that he could reload the crossbow.

“Stay alert! I don’t know how many intruders there are, but I get the feeling that there aren’t many. They must have gone through an advanced evolu...” The gang leader spoke again, but he failed to give the complete warning to his followers.

Chang loosened one foot and kicked against the wall, landing with a nice backflip. He dashed across the hooligans in the route he’d planned, reaching the bedroom door in two seconds. At the same time as he entered the bedroom, he pulled the trigger to release the arched bowstring. Before the gang leader even knew what had happened, the bolt had already punctured his shoulder blade. As the result of damaging the bone and nerves, the assault rifle dropped.

Chang was fast enough to catch it before it touched the ground. The magazine of the assault rifle was already replaced by the gang leader, so Chang made a 180 degree turn and scoured the hooligans.

Bratata!

The power of the assault rifle was fully utilized in Chang’s hands. The bullets were discharged like fearless soldiers, chasing and slaughtering the gangsters.

Those people ditched their leader immediately to flee from the firearm. All of them had their hands covering their heads as they

hurried to the staircase. Nobody dared to risk their life to come back again.

A stream of smoke rose from the muzzle. Chang discarded the heated assault rifle, staring at the man who was nailed to the wardrobe by the bolt.

There was no else except for the gang leader in this bedroom.

Chang didn't kill him immediately. It wasn't because he was merciful, but he was concerned that he might not find his handgun since the gang leader might have buried it somewhere.

"Where is my handgun?" Chang searched the muscular man, but the handgun wasn't on him.

"You are..." The gang leader gazed at Chang's exposed eyes, baffled. "Aren't you the one I met today..."

"My question is, where is my handgun?" Chang exhibited impatience.

"Will you spare my life if I tell you that?" the muscular man begged.

"Either way you are a dead man today. You are only choosing how you want to be executed, with or without torture," Chang ruthlessly replied. He searched the bedroom, worrying that the gang leader might have traded his handgun to another gang.

Fortunately, the gang's collection time was late. By the time they received their "protection fee", the sky had painted its canvas black. It was unlikely that any trading occurred after sunset. Sure enough, his fingers encountered the handgun under the nightstand. He also found a few grenades in the drawer.

"Perfect! That's my handgun and none of the bullets are missing. This is my reward to you." Chang was delighted, loading the bullets to the handgun. He pointed the handgun to the face of the muscular man, one eye closed. "By the way, I wanted to test out this beast for a long time but couldn't find a target. Thank you for being one today."

Bang!

The gang leader's last word to the world was an inaudible cry, his face contorted and body seized with terror. His head was blown up by a sizable bullet.

The head exploded.

Like a fish tank shattered, the head of the gang leader was blasted into indistinguishable pieces. His brain strewn on the wall, dripping like ice cream melting under the hot sun.

Not only had the head exploded, but the shockwave had also blown a big hole behind it through the wardrobe. Chang was impressed by the damage that this handgun could ditch out. The force of it was comparable to a hand cannon, or even stronger.

Upon confirming its power of destruction, Chang unloaded its bullets and placed the handgun back into the holster. He carried the crossbow and the handgun on each of his shoulders. On his way out, he left two grenades in the townhouse—at the bedroom he first entered through. He left by the entrance he made.

Boom!

The grenades roared, and for a brief moment, Chang was deafened. A pillar of smoke and dust blasted out from the shattered windows. Then a wave of orange flame gushed out, thirstily shooting its tongues to the sky. Chang didn't linger around. The townhouse behind him slowly collapsed, dust hovering over the rubble, concealing the merciless annihilation.

He backtracked to the community he resided and changed back into his original clothing. He burned the navy scarf and the black outfit. When the last sparkling flame rose and then died down, he spread the ashes with his right foot and returned to the dining room, where he found Jing still waiting.

She hadn't fallen asleep for a moment after Chang's departure. Her fervent wish was fulfilled when she saw him open the door. She moved aside, leaving the soft rug to Chang so that he could rest.

“Chang, was it dangerous? Are you scared?”

Chang laid down beside her, and his eyes closed. She wiped off

the sweat from his forehead with her sleeve.

“I wasn’t scared...” Chang shook his head.

“But I feel like you always become unhappy after killing someone.” Jing made an effort to wrap her arm around his neck in a half hug like an adult, but her short and skinny arm made it difficult for her.

“I didn’t feel anything in particular, perhaps it was because I killed bad people...” Chang stared at the ceiling feebly, disguising his true feelings that would worry Jing.

“But... Do you remember the time you saved me on the street? You killed bad guys then, too, but I could sense your emotions, you felt terrible,” Jing murmured. Her facial expression softened as she was reminded of how they met. “If I hadn’t been kidnapped by them, I would have never met you.”

“True...” Chang avoided her bright eyes. His heartbeat had resumed its original pace long before he came into the dining room. “But I don’t feel anything, neither sadness nor joy. I am just calm, why?”

“Perhaps you’ve got used to it?” Jing seemed to only have a vague idea of what Chang was talking about.

“I don’t think I’ve gotten used to it. I’m just emotionally numb...” His eyelids closed gently, isolating his mind from reality.



Jing didn't reply. She only sat beside Chang, pondering his words.

Next morning, when Chang was awakened by the warmth of the sunlight, a hook-nosed woman woke up in the research institute.

“Madam, the higher ups have ordered us to depart as soon as possible. We don't have much time left!”

The soldier was agitated, but he didn't dare to wake up his immediate superior while she was still sleeping.

## Chapter 92: There Is No Right Or Wrong

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“Alright, alright.” She rubbed her eyes after sitting up in the bed. “What time is it now?”

“Six forty in the morning,” the soldier replied honestly.

“It’s still early, no rush.” The woman stretched and yawned. “The higher ups are too insensitive, they even let someone into my room when I’m sleeping! Although I grew up in the military, this is still a lady’s room!”

“I, I apologize...” The soldier nodded, bowing to the woman’s complaint, while cold sweat formed on his forehead.

“Did you find their clothing? Or anything they used?” the woman asked, reached out to him with an open palm.

“Yes, I did.” The soldier handed a piece of shabby cloth to the woman. “Here it is.”

“What is this?” The woman picked it, and holding between two fingers sniffed it. The strong odor made all her olfactory nerves sparkle, and the signal was amplified for more than a thousand times until it was delivered to the cerebral cortex. The feedback from the cortex triggered nausea and discomfort to the stomach. She began retching.

“This is the target’s sock. It was said that he dropped it when

crossing the jungle. Dr. Zhuo from the research institute sent it. He said that its tang will be rich enough for you to remember.”

“Oh, screw you, Zhuo.” The woman was wide awake now as the strong odor had stimulated her brain. “F\*ck this sh\*t! Forget about the breakfast, call my team, we are leaving, now!”

“Yes, madam!”

When Chang woke up this morning, Rui was waiting for him at the door.

Since Jing was younger than sixteen years old, she wasn’t assigned any duties. Thus, she followed Chang to wherever he went to.

“She’s really attached to you,” Rui casually started the conversation while patrolling with Chang. “I wish I had a sister like her.”

“Well then, do you want to take care of her for a few days?”

“I was just joking, I can barely feed myself! I’m afraid that I wouldn’t be able to take care of her as well as you do.” Rui waved his hand and picked up a new topic. He said, “By the way, when we left in the morning, I heard from my neighbor that the gang that ‘protected’ us was wrecked last night.”

“Oh really?” Chang tilted his head. “Who did it?”

“Who knows, perhaps some other gang. In a way, they avenged you,” Rui answered casually.

“However, without the gang, we have to be more cautious... Although we had to give away our harvest to them everyday, the other gangs didn’t dare to rob us because of them, too. They did protect us in a fashion.” Rui continued, “I can foresee that since the gang dissolved, hooligans and thieves will begin to consider us as an easy target...”

Rui hadn’t even finished his sentence, when a sharp scream came from the entrance of the community.

Chang turned his head in the direction of the scream.

A young girl was dashing through the entrance, her shirt dishevelled and her hand pressed to her collar. She seemed like she was only fourteen or fifteen years old.

Two young men were chasing after her. One of them seemed to be cultured, judging from his neat robes that belonged to the class of well-educated people, while the other had an air of impudence about him—both around the same age as Chang. As they caught up with the girl, they pushed her to the ground.

“Sons of b\*tches!” Chang was enraged, sprinting toward the girl.

“What’s wrong?” Rui didn’t know what had happened, but he

followed after Chang. “Is something happening over there?”

“It seems like there are two hooligans trying to rape a girl.” As Chang was speaking, he kicked over one of the young men when he made a quick stop in front of them.

“What are you doing?” Chang asked, standing still. Rui and Jing caught up with him a second later.

“What do you mean?” the impudent holligan stood up, provoked. “It’s none of your business.”

“I’m a guard of this community, of course I have to get involved in this. Go away before I punch you!” Chang pointed at him, saying, “I can’t stand raping! Although I’m not a good guy, either, this just makes me feel disgusted. Get out of here!”

“We won’t leave as easily as that.” The cultured man shouted, his face flushed. “She stole our food! Why do we have to leave instead of her? Are you guys shadowing each other? Great! Fight us then! I’m not afraid of you! These days, those peas are more valuable than our lives anyways, everyone is relying on them to survive.”

The cultured man pulled out a dagger, pretending to be threatening.

“Did you steal the Crystal Pea from them?” Chang questioned the young girl, frowning.

“No, I didn’t!” The young girl shook her head, her arms wrapped around her body as she screamed out, “They slander me, they’re just trying to rape me!”

“Bullsh\*t! You have our peas on you, do you dare to show them what is underneath your shirt? We’ll see who is the liar then!” The impudent man pointed at the girl’s chest.

From where he was pointing to, Chang saw a small mason jar.

“These are my Crystal Pea, mine!” The girl wrapped her arms tighter around herself, shaking her head.

“Let’s go.” Seeing this, Rui patted Chang’s shoulder. “We don’t need to take care of issues like this. As long as they aren’t residents of our community, the best we can do is to expel them. You are not a judge, how can you know who is right and who is wrong? Besides, we will often run into arguments during a day, are you going to administer justice to all of them?”

“...” Chang looked back and forth between the mason jar and the raging men, realising that the world was no longer as simple as he’d thought. He rubbed his temple, admitting that he couldn’t tell who was telling the truth and who wasn’t from their accusations. He heaved a sigh with his eyes closed, deciding to turn away from this argument.

“Chang, we should save her. Her index is low, and she is starved and weak. If we leave her alone, she’ll die for sure!” Jing pulled Chang’s shirt, unwilling to leave.

Jing almost begged Chang to help the girl, her face reminding him of how they've met. He felt sympathetic toward the girl, and thinking of this, he turned around, asking, "You guys wanted the pea, right?"

"Oh yeah, we only want the Crystal Pea. We can't even feed ourselves, who do you think this scrawny girl is? No one would be interested in her," the impudent man shouted out, smirking.

"Just give them your peas," Chang said to the girl. "Give them the peas, I have something else for you."

The girl only shook her head. She obviously didn't believe in his words.

The hooligans were impatient. They looted the jar and left while the girl begun bawling.

"... Come with me, I have some extra food for you. Whether you believe in me or not, you have no other choice now." Chang pulled the girl's arm to help her stand up. He told Rui, "We're going into the building, do you mind patrolling by yourself for a bit?"

"Come on! Why do you care so much about this?" Rui didn't understand Chang's kindness.

"It wasn't me, it was my sister who wanted to save her."

The three soon disappeared in the red fog.

As Chang's figure became vague, Rui murmured, "What a meddling guy he is!"

...

They returned to Chang's hiding room. There he took out the wooden box that contained the white worms and retrieved a small bowl from the shelf. He scooped up a half-bowl of the worms, using his right hand to block the edge of the bowl to prevent the worms from wriggling out. He then placed the bowl into a cooking pot filled with water and steamed it with a gas cooker.

Ten minutes later, a bowl of "rice" was served to the girl.

"Try it, it's edible." Handing the bowl to the girl, Chang threw a few of the worms into his mouth, proving that they were nontoxic.

The girl scrupulously observed Chang until confirming that the worms were safe. Then she grabbed the bowl from Chang and began to devour them like a wolf. In less than a minute, the bowl was cleared.

The girl's eyes were full of gratefulness.

"You should leave here now, I've done what I can for you." Chang asked the girl to leave before she got too attached to them.



Yet the girl didn't respond to his order. She sat on the chair as if she hadn't heard anything.

"Can I play with her for just one day?" Jing sensed her unwillingness and so tried to shield her from leaving. "I felt lonely these days... She is around my age, and I wish somebody like her could keep me company. Just for one day, please?" she pleaded for his permission, her voice soft.

"Well... then, promise me, just one day," Chang finally agreed after some thinking.. "But you must understand what we're going through right now. We can't afford to have another person living with us."

He then confirmed they were safe and left the room.

"Have a good time, girls! I need to go back to continue on patrolling with Rui, after all, he treated us well and I can't leave him alone out there."

"Sure! We'll be here waiting for you!" Jing waved to Chang. Before he had even stepped out through the door, she had already began prattling to the girl, her hand gripping the newcomers' skirt.

Without further hesitation, Chang gently closed the door.

It was a tedious morning of patrolling. He witnessed the changes

brought to the community by the loss of its deterrent, the “protective” gang. Arson, robbery, homicide and rape could be seen everywhere. The community received ten times the amount of attacks compared to before, and Chang was incapable of stopping every crime.

Only now did he realise that the consequences of what he had done were irreparable.

It brought back the emotional numbness again. Even if the crime was right in front of him, he chose not to see it.

His mind was restless, blaming himself for being juvenile. His footsteps were heavier. When he was about to return home, the noise that he’d been hearing all day disappeared out of a sudden.

A series of neat footsteps replaced the brief quietness.

He knew who they belonged to as he had lived in the research institute for some time.

“The military!” he murmured to himself.

The sound came from far away, but soon it became louder. He saw a troop reveal itself from the red fog upon coming closer. The soldiers were entering the community.

“Sh\*t!” Chang almost froze up from the panic, but his body moved before his mind caught up. To run away from the soldiers,

he sprinted as fast as he could to his room, In there, he had his handgun, the crossbow, and most importantly, Jing.

Those things were as important to him as his own life, and they were what he cared about the most.

Chang had grown much in these days, his index having passed six long ago unbeknowst to him.

Having his calculation ability as a bonus, he was able to find the fastest route to his room. He ran over a hundred meters in eight seconds.

When he entered the building, it was blocking the sunlight from shedding over him.

Chang climbed the stairs at full speed. He crashed through the door and grabbed Jing under his arm. His other hand reached out for the handgun and the crossbow. He swung them behind his back, double checked that he had everything, and then jumped off the building through the window.

“Chang! What’s wrong?”

“The military! They’re here for us,” he answered in rush. Having Jing in his arms, he covered her head so that she wouldn’t get hurt by the broken glass shards.

“I see.” Jing buried her head in his chest and then felt a sudden

jolt as Chang's feet steadily landed on the ground. He didn't hesitate at all, and they soon disappeared at the end of the street.

...

At the same time, the hooknosed woman was leading her troop, walking straight toward the apartment building which Chang had just escaped from. Her dog-like sense of smell mapped out a path for her to Chang's room, whose window he'd just broken.

"Hello!" the hooknosed woman took a deep breath, turning her face to the remaining girl in the room. She smirked. "It smells just like that sock, do you feel the same?"

## Chapter 93: The Gene Altered Soldiers

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“What are you talking about?” The girl was frightened, her face distorted due to fear.

“Nothing important, I was just asking you if you’ve seen two people that I happen to be looking for.” The hooknose woman fished out two photos from her uniform pocket. “Here they are, an eighteen or nineteen-year-old boy, and a twelve-year-old girl.”

“No... I didn’t see them at all.” Seeing the familiar faces on the photos, the girl lied with a stutter.

Her incompetent lying skills sold her out to the professionally trained soldiers. The woman squinted at the girl, then grabbed the collar of her shirt, lifting the girl up so that she could see into her eyes. She scanned the girl’s face, then threw her to one of the soldiers.

“Get someone to interrogate her. And I need two soldiers to be stationed in this community to get me some fresh information. His scent is everywhere, I’m pretty sure he stayed here for some time.” The woman then commanded the rest of the soldiers, “Follow me! Our targets ran away already.

“Speed up, boys! No matter how far he goes, as long as he is still in Zheng Zhou, I’ll trace him down.”

---

Chang galloped along the street in Zheng Zhou with Jing in his arm. He had no clue of how the military pinpointed where he hid. In this world of chaos, there was no wire or radio communications of any sort. That's why, it wasn't easy to put someone as wanted. No one knew where he and Jing had left to, even Qing Shui wasn't told.

Various thoughts filled his mind, yet his feet didn't slow down the pace. Chang was much faster and ran away from the troops with ease.

For the next hour, Chang spent every second on sprinting at an unprecedented speed from the east to the south. He didn't stop until he thought he had made enough distance from his pursuers. He placed Jing down since he was out of breath. Beads of sweat rolled down from his forehead, and inhale as much air as he could to relieve the burning in his lungs.

"Chang, who are they?" Jing asked, her foot brushing the damp grass. "Are they from the research institute? Did Dr. Huang denounce us again? She is the only person in the community that knew about our past."

"I don't think so..." Chang recalled the interactions between them and Dr. Huang—nothing unusual stood out. "I don't think she did it, even though she knows about us. Besides, I didn't see her leave the community in the past two days."

"Then how did they find us? We also lost our worm box... What about food?"

“I don’t know how they find us, but you don’t need to be worried about food at all. Remember.” Chang patted the crossbow behind his back, saying, “I’m more experienced in hunting now. The worst case is to steal, which I tried to avoid. But I won’t let you starve, okay?”

“Chang, they are hunting us down though, our life is going to be turbulent. Are you sure we can eat our food comfortably with these hunters chasing behind us?” Jing asked her last question.

Her words became their nightmare for the following days.

In the next four days, they hid from place to places as if they were frightened prey. No matter how far they went, the troop always persistently caught up with them in a few hours.

For a few times, they almost got surrounded by the troop when they were having meals. Fortunately, Jing was always able to sense their presence at a distance, and Chang was able to act fast and decisive. Otherwise, they would have been captured by those armed soldiers.

Although escaping from their trail wasn’t challenging, it made Chang more curious about why they were tracked down all the time. He realised that it may not be as simple as denouncement this time.

At dawn, Jing and Chang once again concealed themselves in an abandoned house in a small village nearby. Chang’s curiosity and

agitation almost bursted out from his chest. He asked, “Why? Why are they still behind us no matter where we go? We even changed our clothing from time to time, but didn’t find any tracking devices. How then? What makes them capable of tracking us?”

“I’m not sure, perhaps one of them is an EM, and that person may have developed some sort of an ability to track. Think about this, we used to have mammals who could tail their prey for a long distance,” Jing spoke, rubbing her chin.

“Tailing prey...” Chang browsed through everything Qing Shui had told him before, his eyes closed as he concentrated on recollecting every tiny bit of information. Finally, he recalled that Qing Shui exclaimed his praise to mammal olfaction. “Some of their excellent noses are more than a thousand times more sensitive than a human’s...”

“Perhaps, they traced us by smell like a dog?” Chang came to a sudden realization.

On the other side, the hooknosed woman was puzzled by a similar question.

“Manguang, I don’t really understand this. No matter how hard we try, they always run away before we can encircle them. What’s wrong?” the hooknosed woman asked her adjutant—a tall, broad-shouldered man with a skinhead.

“Madam, I’m afraid I can’t answer this question, either. I thought it was pure coincidence until they slipped away from our



strategic besiegement,” the adjutant replied. “I brought some soldiers with me to check where we planned to ambush, but none of the traps we set up were activated. That means they discovered our presence by themselves, not by anti-detection devices.”

“That means... One of them is an EM as well?” The hooknosed woman lifted her eyelids.

“Yes, I have a sense that one of them might be a sensory EM. Thinking logically, I think visual mutation is the least possible option because we were lurking underneath wild grasses and ruins. No matter how good a person’s vision might be, I don’t think he or she could spot us everytime. If they were an olfactory EM, they would have known we were close long before we approached their shelter. The sense of touch and taste aren’t useful in detection in this case at all. Therefore...” The tall man stopped.

“Therefore, this means they may have exceptional hearing?” The hooknosed woman lay a finger on her arched nose bridge. “Not only are they advanced in hearing, but they also were able to run away as soon as they discovered us. Not to mention their speed... This also means...”

“It means they are much stronger than normal humans...” the adjutant continued her unfinished words.

“Well then, this just became difficult.” The hooknosed woman thought over potential solutions. She stood up. “Manguang, I need to return to the research institute to inform Zhuo about what is going on here. Ask him to send his special force, we don’t need many but a few. At least they have to be faster than our target.

Without them, it will be impossible to capture them.”

“Yes, madam.” The adjutant saluted.

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In the next two days.

“Chang, they didn’t follow us for the past two days. Do you think the grass mush worked?” Jing was happy, sitting on the sofa in an empty apartment. “It feels good when no one is after us.”

“I’m not hundred percent sure how well this works though.” Chang lifted his arm, sniffing the rich scent of the grass.

“I thought Mr. Li used this before, it worked back then.”

“But he also told us that nothing can completely conceal the smell of an organism. It can only be a camouflage scent. If someone’s nose is truly as sensitive as a dog’s, they will catch us regardless of what we do.”

“Chang, you worry too much...” Jing was about to console his idle fear when her facial expression changed suddenly. “Wait, there is a level 31 approaching us at a rapid speed!”

“Thirty one?” Chang was astonished, he was only able to lift Jing up when the door was blown away.

The burglar-proof door was crashed in a piece of deformed metal. It hit the wall with a sickening whomp. Then a figure in camouflage lunged for them.

In Chang's eyes, the shadow leaped to them at a speed of 17.56 meters per second. It all happened in a blink of an eye, leaving Chang no time to react.

While having Jing in his arms, he predicted the path of the first attack, yet he only managed to dodge with effort. He saw the face of the figure while squinting back.

No ears and nose, its eyelids had excessive folds like a rhino's. It was hairless and its eyes didn't resemble any features of human eyes—it was a devil-like creature.

“Sh\*t, it must be the gene-altered soldier that Qing Shui warned me about.” Chang immediately switched Jing to his left hand while reaching out for that giant handgun on his back.

The creature didn't give him the chance of doing so. Having an advantage in speed and flexibility, the creature had already turned around when Chang just got his handgun out. A balled and angry fist struck Chang's face.

As if the number was automatically generated, Chang knew that within 0.04 seconds, the fist would punch the left side of his face. As much as he attempted to dodge again, his muscle reaction was much slower than his mind. And because of the great disparity

between their power, even when he saw the attack coming, his body was locked in place, and Chang failed to avoid the deadly left hook.

Ah!

It hit right on his bones and teeth. His left face collapsed as the supporting structure underneath the skin was smashed into bits. Chang was blown into the wardrobe by the impact of the left hook—the hardwood furniture cracked up. Jing was freed from Chang's loosened arms, but she was also thrown away by the momentum.

“Ah!” The creature was aware of the need to keep his targets alive as commanded. He caught Jing in the air, then veered to the wardrobe where Chang had fallen.

At the same time, a deafening gunshot sped from the shadow in the wardrobe.

The bullet was faster than its sound. It penetrated the creature's chest, making a flower of blood bloom.

The gene altered soldier couldn't bear the shock of the handgun, and his back smacked against the wall in the living room.

## Chapter 94: Return To The Jungle

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Scrambling up from the shattered wardrobe, Chang was dizzy. He ignored his physical discomfort, gaping at the strange soldier and Jing.

The last shot was fired by intuition, since he was struck on the face and blown away by the force, completely losing his balance and sense of direction. A shower of wood fragments and a collapsed wood panel blocked his view. He merely relied on his calculations before the fall into the wardrobe.

Fortunately, the shot hit the target.

However, although the shot was right on the soldier's chest, it didn't cause enough damage. In a few seconds, the creature would stand up again. Its chest bone had slightly collapsed, judging from a shallow indent in his chest. A hole was burnt in its uniform, revealing a blood-soaked spider silk bulletproof vest, as well as flesh and blood.

“What the hell... This monster is also wearing a bulletproof vest?” Upon seeing it, he raised his handgun again.

However, the creature had tasted the power of the handgun. Before Chang had raised his arm, it had darted aside.

The creature was agile. It was slower than a bullet, but still able to move before Chang could act.

In other words, Chang had lost his target before he had even tried to aim. And when he recalibrated his direction, the creature had left his range already.

After a few tries, Chang realized that shooting the creature was an impossible mission. The creature had also thoroughly understood the lethality of the handgun and didn't dare to rashly approach Chang, either. Even though comparing to it, Chang was slower, but getting closer to him would still be a dangerous action.

The dynamic confrontation only lasted for a few seconds with one constantly pointing and the other dodging. Jing's scream broke the deadlock.

“Chang! Run! Run! Another one is coming!”

Her voice filled the room, but soon it was replaced by the same heavy footsteps as those that the creature before them had, getting closer up the stairs. Chang quickly glanced at Jing as though he saw the other creature breaking into the room. His ability apprised him that the coming creature would enter the room in two seconds, and he wouldn't have a chance to get away if he were to face two gene-altered soldiers.

Without further consideration, Chang looked briefly at Jing, then made a cruel decision as Qing Shui would do—he escaped the room without Jing.

Hesitation signified losing the chance to flee. He knew that he

wouldn't be able to take Jing with him since she was in the opposite corner. The backup soldier would catch them both if he were to grab Jing.

The consequences of such a decision were to be avoided.

If both of them were captured, Jing would have no chance of escaping at all. Chang's decision wasn't cold-blooded but rational—because the creature had caught Jing in the air instead of briskly smashing her, he knew that its mission was to capture and not exterminate.

Therefore, his abandonment was uneasy but the burden of protecting Jing was lifted.

Knowing that the odds were against him, putting up a desperate fight to rescue Jing was a meaningless sacrifice.

It wasn't a struggle to choose, and he knew that Qing Shui would have done the same.

Chang broke the window as he sprang up.

He and Jing had hid on the top-level of a seventeen floor apartment. As Chang rapidly descended, the creature was about to go down in pursuit, but was forced back by three resounding gunshots.

Diving through the air, Chang regretted that he'd made a wrong

choice for their safe house. Even if his body was enhanced, the force of gravity acceleration would only make every piece of his bone crack if he was lucky. Fortunately, he spotted an area with an abundance of trees.

As if he was swimming, he adjusted his descent so that he fell onto the trees. His landing struck the branches, which cushioned his fall. Although he ended up on the ground on his back, he successfully avoided dying from the crash.

“Ah!” The hard contact with the ground made him groan. But he took a deep breath and picked himself up as soon as he found the pain on the back become bearable. He scurried away so that the troop wouldn’t catch him.

The red fog softly floating in the air like it always did, making the figures of the coming troop dim. He bypassed them and disappeared at the end of the street.

At the same time, the creature stood still by the window, staring at the mysterious red fog. As soon as it lost sight of Chang, it lost the sense of where he fled to as well. It turned around and stood by Jing, matching the other gene-altered soldier.

Five minutes later, a man and a woman walked in. The man was tall and stout, whereas the woman had a distinct hooknose.

The hooknosed woman inspected the room, and her glance ended on Jing. She asked, “One just ran away?”



“Ah.” The creature nodded.

“How did he run away? It doesn’t make sense, I thought you guys were good at this.” The woman tiptoed, carefully observing the creatures wrinkled eyes. “Besides, how did you get hurt?”

“Ah... hurt...” The creature frowned even though it had no eyebrows. It stared at its own chest as if it was just as confused. But it said nothing more.

“There is no point asking them, madam. The intelligence of these gene-altered soldiers is low, they can’t understand complicated phrases.” The tall man walked up, saying, “Instead, maybe that little girl can tell us something.

“Am I right?” The tall man turned to Jing and lifted her up as if she was as light as a feather. “Tell me, where did he go?”

Jing turned her head away, firmly pressing her lips as she passed over his question.

“Manguang, put her down. Zhuo said that we need to treat them nicely.” The hooknosed woman took away Jing and let her stand on the ground. “We just missed one, and that’s not a big deal. It was a hard battle for him to escape from these boys. Look at the shattered wardrobe and the marks on the wall, he must have been crashed into the furniture.

“And that means he was injured, maybe not severely but at least

it will slow him down. He won't be able to run too far. As long as I am still here, who needs to worry about losing track of him?" The hooknosed woman grinned as she spoke. "We still have these gene-altered soldiers, and I am still leading the troop. I think we only need one more try, and he'll become a bird in a cage."

As Chang hurtled along the street, wind stroked his face. It was hurting badly as if on fire. The left hook had destroyed the right side of his face completely, and he lost half of his teeth. It was his worst injury ever since his whole right face had collapsed without the support of bones and teeth and the skin drooped and swang as he ran. However, ten minutes later, his condition worsened. The injured side became swollen, as if the droopy skin was a deflated balloon being slowly refilled by a hyperemic response. Thus, now his face looked like an unusual-sized bun. It was also pressing against his right eye, resulting in the loss of half of his vision. This sudden change made him feel dizzy.

"I need some sort of treatment for my face..." Chang ripped off a long piece of cloth from the bottom of his shirt, wrapping his head with it and leaving only his left eye out.

"If I don't get treatment soon, it will become a permanent problem. But I don't have time to find a doctor, either." He struggled with thoughts colliding in his mind. "As long as they are still tailing me, I will be caught once I stop for treatment. I have to exterminate them to gain some peace..."

Chang's palm covered his swollen face, and he was also filled with sorrow over losing Jing. A hint of resoluteness filled his eyes.

“You’ve been giving me trouble, now I shall let you taste the bitterness...”

Upon making up his mind, Chang dashed towards the jungle on the east side of the city.

# Chapter 95: Trap

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The jungle was his last bet since he could never be a matched opponent for the military and the gene-altered soldiers. Only in the jungle, where uncertainty and hidden dangers treated invaders equally, Chang would have a chance of exterminating them.

He returned to the jungle, holding the hope of purging his enemy. Without a doubt, the jungle was pitted with peril. The danger within was more deadly day by day as species were evolving. It had been a while since he got out of the jungle, therefore, he implemented a full preparation against the dangers before he went in.

First, he secured the “bandage” around his head so that it wouldn’t fall when he fought.

Second, he made another batch of grass mush and smeared the mixture on his exposed skin so that his scent was reduced to a minimum.

Third, while on his way to the jungle, for the first time he robbed someone. All he harvested from the gang was a full water bottle and a meal that he ate ravenously. After the robbery, he left quickly.

When he finished his preparations, he stood below the “Welcome to Zhengzhou” billboard, which he’d visited before and which had become even more rusty. The jungle was expanding its territory and expunging all traces of civilisation around it.

Every inch of the jungle became more vital than it had been previously. The trees reached their arms higher to the sky to compete with their own breeds. By extracting an abundance of nutrient from the underground, their bodies were more stout and solid. Their skins were made up of a thick coat of fungi and fern, and the roots were blanketed by lush bushes. It was nothing like before, and a variety of noises echoed in the jungle. The buzzing sounds were the most clear, but there were many more that could be heard. Together, the inhabitants of this jungle were composing a vivid symphony of life.

But it could also be the opera of death.

Chang took a deep breath, smoothing a wrinkle on the bandage around his head. He cautiously chose his path, entering in his most vigilant manner to receive the challenge from the mysterious jungle.

Half an hour later, the hooknosed woman arrived at the billboard, where Chang had made a brief stop. She was with three gene-altered soldiers and her own troop.

“Madam, are you sure he went in there?” The agitating buzzing that was heard from the edge of the jungle worried the adjutant. He swallowed.

“I am 100% positive about this, don’t you trust my nose?” The woman tied her brows. “He is a savage boy, and that I didn’t foresee... What a desperate fightback!”

“Who do we do now? Should we follow him?” The adjutant hesitated, he seemed terrified.

“We’ll go after him no matter what.” The woman nodded.

“Are you sure? He could have died in there already!”

“Well, in that case, we still have to check. I believe you know the consequences of not completing this mission. Zhuo isn’t amiable on this kind of issue.” The woman tapped on the chest of a gene-altered soldier, speaking again, “I heard that he is still looking for human subject participants, and he can do anything when he is unhappy. If we don’t go back with two people, I can’t assure you that you won’t be one of those in the tanks.”

“Ah!” The gene-altered soldier roared as the hooknosed woman tapped on him, causing the woman to retrieve her hand by reflex.

“Alright, alright.” The adjutant swallowed again when staring at these human shaped beasts. He shouted to the troop, “Follow up! We are going into the jungle!”

Led by the adjutant, the troop slowly entered the jungle. The concentration of plants became thicker the deeper they went. Although the troop couldn’t see beyond three meters, the surroundings dimmed as the lush branches blocked the sky.

The layered tree crowns created a mottled dome, filtering the

sunlight. Thus, the soldiers' vision was further limited, the difficulty of marching raised. There was no path cultivated, and they had to find their own way; the ground was slippery and bumpy as roots and fungi weaved together. Waist-high bushes that grew in patches added another difficulty for the marching troop.

The woman was beside her adjutant, guiding the troop with her sensitive nose. She constantly sniffed the air so that she could separate Chang's scent from others who lived inside the jungle. Even though her nose had become familiar with the scent, and it was unlikely that she would lose the trail, she still proceeded into the jungle with wariness.

"The scents and odors are mixed all together in the jungle, and most of them are brand new to me. Even though I know his scent, it is time-consuming to distinguish it from the rest. My ability is not helping much in this scenario." The woman was irritated by the speed of the troop. "And I realised that the advantage of having a troop is dwarfed in here, these normal soldiers are slowing us down."

"Then what do you think we should do?" The adjutant was aware of the same problem.

"Can you take the troop back to the city? I will pursue him with three gene-altered soldiers." The hooknosed woman's expression changed as her nose caught an unusual smell. "Where does this heavy blood smell come from?"

"Where?"

“It is about 100 meters ahead of us.”

“It’s normal for there to be a heavy smell of blood in the jungle, I guess, since animals predate upon each other, resulting in bloody residue.”

“No, this is different. Animals barely waste their food, and even if they were to predate, they would finish their dead prey as soon as possible to reduce the spread of blood scent.” The blood smell obviously overwhelmed the woman’s nose. She said, “This smells like an animal was dismembered. and its blood was deliberately splashed around. Animals won’t risk their lives to do this, it must be made by a human.”

“You mean this was made by our target?”

“Yes! It’s him!” The hooknosed raised her pitch, screaming, “The smell is fresh, I didn’t sense it until just now, but it means he’s nearby!”

“Wait, what do we do now? This must be a trap that he setup for us!”

“Of course we’ll catch up with him!” she bellowed, waving her hands to the gene-altered soldiers. “The longer we stay in the jungle, the lower our chances of leaving safely get. We have these gene-altered soldiers with us, what are you afraid of when it’s just him alone?”



“Number One, Number Two and Number Three, the target is that way!” The woman ran briskly while commanding the creatures. As if concerned that the gene-altered soldiers would be unable to understand her order, she added gestures to show them the direction.

The gene-altered soldiers were killing machines as Zhuo had made them to be. They passed the woman with a burst of speed.

A trail was blazed through brambles. The creatures were so fast that they forged ahead for over a hundred meters even where the surface was slippery. Soon, they arrived at the area where fresh blood dripped from the branches. The creatures went in different directions to search for Chang, their uniforms dampened by jumping up and down among the branches.

Chang was hiding behind a tree on the far side, squatting on one of its thickest branches. His mouth was set in a broad grin—the smell of blood was irresistible to the animals that lurked in the jungle. He’d learned this with his own sweat and blood. Therefore, when he saw the blood gradually stain their clothing, he knew that trouble was coming for them.

As he expected, in less than three minutes, the first wave of predators arrived.

The first wave was obviously the most speedy. They were a group of beetles, but their size wasn’t enlarged through evolution. By estimation, they were only as big as a human nail but their elytra

were hardened to an iron's. Given their miniscule size, they were flying at a tremendous speed. The tense buzzing made Chang's scalp feel pin and needles.

The beatles showered the gene-altered soldiers while they were still looking for Chang. Hundreds and thousands of beatles constituted a falling dome, its shadow diving sharply towards the scaled skin of the creatures, venomous mandibles eager to bite into their muscles.

“Ah! Ah!” Soon the gene-altered soldiers were covered by these miniscule beatles, making them into “bugmen”.

Although the scaled skin provided protection against the beatles, they were still troubled. They waved their hands to try and brush off the swarm, yet their efforts were barely effective. Later, as more beatles landed on them, the force pushed them down from the tree crowns.

The beatles constantly attempted to bite through the scaled skin but failed. They soon realised, though, that they could enter their bodies through olfactory and auditory holes. The bugs even bit into their eyes so that the gene-altered soldiers would lose their vision.

Even though the beatles didn't get any fresh flesh out of this attack, the gene-altered soldiers lost their rationale as the buzzing sound and the itching of their bodies would not go away. They acted on instinct and started running away in anxiousness.

Some other beetles that arrived later lost the share of the great meal, but they kept circling around to await for something else.

Bang!

A gunshot blasted through the buzzing noise, cueing the lost beetles on their next target. A stream of fresh smell of blood quietly suffused the air. As if they had received an order, all the beetles turned to the same direction and dived down.

The distance was only about one hundred meters, which only took Chang less than ten seconds to cover and find the troop. As soon as he guided the beetles to the gene-altered soldiers, he jumped between trees to find the best sniping spot.

Without hesitation, Chang shot the first soldier he saw. The mechanism of the handgun provided a great deal of kinetic energy to the bullet, which penetrated through his chest, making a giant see-through blood hole. Blood splashed, and Chang's second bait was successfully dropped.

Before the troop could notice him, Chang ran away from this battlefield.

He didn't look back for even a second, because he had confidence in the savage predators being able to solve his problem.

# Chapter 96: Battlefield

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The reason why he fled the scene was not only because of the beetles, but also because of the gunshots that were fired by the soldiers under panic. There was one more reason too—the gene-altered soldiers might be able to get rid of the beetles soon.

After all, the predators that he lured there weren't the superior ones. His biggest threat, the gene-altered soldiers, was only troubled without incurring any actual damage. That's why he decisively ran as fast he could. Chang wasn't a matching opponent for any of those soldiers once they got away from the beetles. The gene-altered soldiers were superior in speed, and Chang would never be capable of outcompeting that. His only advantage was his high familiarity with the jungle and a deep understanding of the nature of the predators that lived within it. He knew those things by heart, and now, was able to utilize his knowledge to defend himself.

As for the other unstable factors, Chang couldn't do anything but put hope in the commander's irrationality and the low intelligence of the gene-altered soldiers, so that he could get away.

Tearing through the jungle, Chang didn't look back.

On the other side, where the troop rested at, the soldiers faced their most terrifying nightmare upon the arrival of the beetles.

The gene-altered soldiers weren't injured because of their scaled skin, but to the normal soldiers, it was a catastrophic disaster.

The beetles had become venomous from the rapid evolution, and the number of them was overwhelmingly large. A bite would numb the surrounding neurons, and there were hundreds and thousands of the beetles. One word to describe the character of these beetles was bloodthirsty. Firstly, they would inject the disabling venom into their prey, and then tear off their skin and muscles bit by bit.

The troop was now confronting the deadly and aggressive swarm. The tremendous amount of beetles was undefeatable. Some smarter soldiers immediately dropped their weapons and veered from the battlefield, but most of them were drowned in the buzzing. They collapsed and became a pool of blood and flesh soon after they were covered by the beetles.

It was merely a swarm of beetles, which were probably the weakest predators in the jungle. Yet, they crushed the armed troop effortlessly. The troop was as expected, losing their rational when grappling with these unknown enemies—some scurried away like frightened rats, and some attempted to shoot in desperation at the shrouding “dark cloud”, but neither of the two choices helped them escape their fate.

A flamethrower might be a good choice at exterminating these beetles, but none of the soldiers was equipped with this heavy weapon as they were executing the mission in the city. The order from the institute was to capture two targets, ending up in the jungle wasn't part of their plan.

Thus, the troop haphazardly fled, few of them getting away.

Most ended their short lives in this ghastly land.

The hooknosed woman and her adjutant were the first few who escaped. They had watched the disaster from afar as they were too powerless to stop the tragedy. Upon reuniting with the three gene-altered soldiers, the hooknosed woman led her remaining subordinates away from the scene with fear lingering in their hearts.

“What the heck... It was such a simple trap and most of us fell for it. How dangerous can this jungle be?” As they left the swarm, the adjutant swore in a low voice. “We lost too many soldiers, and I don’t think the deserters will return to the military. We really messed up the mission!”

“I know, even if we catch the other target by ourselves, punishment is awaiting us.” The woman was worried as well. “We don’t even know where he is now.”

“Since we failed this mission, why don’t we...” The adjutant lowered his voice again as he spoke. “Why don’t we abort the mission and be deserters ourselves... After all, with your ability, the military will have a hard time finding us, and the target...”

Smash!

A fist swiftly and violently flew at the adjutant before he had even finished his request. Its force smashed his head, making his voice vanish in the air. His brain scattered, and the headless corpse was propelled for over ten meters. It didn’t stop until it hit a tree.

“What are you doing?” Witnessing the brutal slaughter by the gene-altered soldier, the woman howled, “What did you do? Didn’t Zhuo tell you that you all listen to my commands for this mission? What are you trying to do?”

The woman gazed at the splattered brain, her eyes red. Apparently, the adjutant was a long time comrade of hers.

“... Mission ... Abort ... Die ...” As if the gene-altered soldiers didn’t hear her pain, their faces distorted from anger. Three pairs of baleful eyes stared at the woman.

“I didn’t say to abort the mission, I didn’t!” The hooknosed woman shivered as she made contact with their eyes. She waved her hands, afraid that these creatures might misunderstand her. “I didn’t say I will abort this mission! Do you understand? I won’t abort it!”

The gene-altered soldiers resumed their expressionless faces as they heard the woman’s words. They stood still as three stakes.

The woman was relieved when the gene-altered soldiers returned to normal again. She heaved a sigh. “What kind of commands did Zhuo put in your brains? Why did you understand me out of a sudden?”

The hooknosed woman closed her eyes while standing in front of the corpse. She silently lamented her adjutant’s death, reluctantly leaving the scene as she knew the blood smell may get her into

trouble.

Bringing the gene-altered soldiers with her, the hooknosed woman utilized her hound-like ability to once again track down Chang's scent.

And Chang kept creating troubles for them along the way.

The jungle was terribly dangerous. Chang didn't dare to go into the center as he was afraid of getting lost, yet he didn't slow down in case the soldiers caught up. Therefore, he was spinning around the edge of the jungle.

Because the woman didn't have an enhanced physique, she could only keep tailing him while distinguishing his scent in the air. She chased with the gene-altered soldiers at her full speed, but Chang's shadow was still nowhere to be seen.

Time passed by with this ongoing chasing game.

By the afternoon, the woman had completely experienced the horror of the jungle. In only a few hours, she had almost died from many incidents—leeches went under her skin, slurping her blood, thin vines hanging down from branches strapped around her neck, attempting to suffocate her. She even got bitten by some venomous beetles at the ankle, and there was also one time, when half of her head got almost chopped off by a strange animal camouflaged as dead wood.



The pursuit covered her body with scratches. If she hadn't been accompanied by the gene-altered soldiers, she would have died more than a couple times.

On the other side, Chang's experience with the jungle wasn't much easier than the woman's. He too ran into a few dangers, but he managed to get away from them relying on his calculation ability. As he was also an EM in the physical category, his enhancement kept him alive till dusk.

At that time, Chang reached the limit of his physical capabilities—aided by the sunlight, he was able to avoid dangers with his exceptional vision. But without illumination, his chances of survival were minimal. He knew that he couldn't waste any more time in the jungle. If they didn't have a final battle now, he wouldn't be surviving this night.

While traveling around, he planned his final destination for this battle—they were going to fight at another place that he knew. In the den of the spiders, who trapped the gigantic millipedes. Hopefully, those monsters could surprise the low intelligence gene-altered soldiers.

# Chapter 97: Spiders And Their Silk

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Sorting his memory while trotting in the jungle, Chang groped around an area along the edge of the jungle.

The dusk had arrived, and the sun was lowering its face behind the horizon. He sped up his pace, hoping that by the time he arrived at the spider zone, the last beam of sunlight would cease.

The last rays of the setting sun granted him the ability to see the transparent spider silk, yet leaving his enemies no chance of noticing it. By his estimations, the night would fall completely in approximately 20 minutes, and the hooknosed woman would catch up with him in half an hour.

He wanted to enter the den when the sunlight was still illuminating the jungle so that he could plan out his path. And hopefully, when the woman and those gene-altered soldiers arrived, they won't have sight of the thin and shiny spider silk.

As he calculated, the time he spent on his journey to the spider zone was exactly 20 minutes as he had expected. When he began to see the spider silk, the sun was still lingering on the horizon.

Relying on the last bit of light, Chang realized that the spider zone had expanded to be a few times bigger than before.

The light reflected on the spider silk, making them visible to Chang. The spider webs were weaved between tree trunks, one next to the other. The number and density of the spider webs

grew, and they were more difficult to evade for invaders the further into the their zone.

The number of spider webs positively correlated with the population of the spiders. It must be unimaginably large now.

As flexible as Chang was, he had to duck between the splits. He was doing it so carefully that none of the spider silks were touched.

The reason behind his cautiousness was because he knew that spiders were a different type of predator from other species. Their predation habits relied on the sense of touch. The hair on their limbs were extremely sensitive to vibration. If there was a prey thrashing about on a web, the spiders would rush to the source in a surge.

Except for the sense of touch, the vision and olfaction of spiders were weak. Therefore, Chang believed that if he was heedful enough, he should be able to stay away from the hunting spiders.

Chang slipped between the slits, aided by his superior vision. He saw spiders lurking on the edges of their own webs, dozing off comfortably in their spots. His figure was shielded by the red fog, so none of the killers, who became active at night, were bothered by his presence.

The darkness was inevitable. It slowly shrouded the jungle. In the last minute before the sun entirely disappeared, Chang backtracked and left the spider territory. He squatted down with eyes closed, silently calculating and analyzing the route. Based on

what he had observed, he drew a map with the locations of spider webs in his mind. The map helped him plan out his route of advance.

Upon finishing his preparations, Chang removed his jacket and threw it into the spider zone. He then vanished in the darkness.

15 minutes later, the hooknosed woman and the gene-altered soldiers surfaced from the red fog. They were lucky enough to stop before the dense spider webs.

“The target is in front of us.” The woman took a deep breath, her nose twitched. “He stopped moving, I think he set up a trap again.”

“Ah.” The gene-altered soldiers didn’t understand her assertion, only responding to the first sentence. Knowing that the target was in front of them, they set foot in the spider zone without giving it a second thought.

The woman followed her subordinates, sighing.

However, they didn’t go too far. Number One became glued to the “invisible” spider silk. He roared, confused by the sudden restraints.

“Ah!” Number One was the one who had walked at the very front. Suddenly though, his body could no longer move as he wished it to, and hence, he kept his walking posture at where he

stopped. Apparently, the creature was irritated. He struggled to pull off the tenacious spider silk from his body, but instead, the spider silk swathed his body even tighter when he waved his hands more vigorously.

Number One's scuffle with the spider web startled the host. As it sensed the damage of its web, a spider as big as half of a human jumped off from the edge to attack its invader.

Chang peaked at the spider, realizing that it had become more perfect than it was a month ago. The perfection was nothing more than the advancement of its weapon without enlarging the body size too much. It had its hair straighten out to better sense the vibrations in the air, and its limbs became much more muscular. The mouthpiece got sharper, so that it was almost as if it had daggers at the front of its head..

The spiders had evolved to be more deadly.

However, even though the spiders had improved, the gene-altered soldiers were much more advance in power. Number One threw his fist at the spider, cracking its torso in half. The spider flipped as it was hurled away. The gene-altered soldier was designed to kill, after all, and the spider, as a product of natural evolution, was less formidable.

Chang had waited for this moment for a time. He hadn't expected the the first spider to cause any injuries on the gene-altered soldier, but was instead waiting for a perfect moment when the gene-altered soldier would stay still. When the chance arrived, he fired the first shot of his handgun without hesitation

The timing was perfect as the gene-altered soldier was within Chang's vision, and he was trapped in the spider silk. All these conditions ensured that Chang would get a headshot.

Besides, he also believed that if the shot hit a spot where the bulletproof skin was damaged, it may cause a lethal wound. If the wound was on the heart or the head, even though the genes were altered to be bulletproof, death was the only option for his target.

Bang!

The great kinetic energy not only brought a dazzling lights, but also a bullet of an unusual size hidden within the sparkles. It travelled through the air at its greatest speed, penetrating the brain of the gene-altered soldier. The force of the bullet pulled the soldier's body for a few meters to the back, and left a fist-sized wound on the skull.

It was a crisp killing shot. As long as Chang had enough time to aim, causing a lethal wound to a gene-altered soldier wasn't impossible.

Besides, the odds were favoring him in hitting the target as he could make fine calculations over his actions.

However, flighting was the most difficult part in this battle. The first shot brought danger to him.

Number Two and Number Three immediately reacted upon the gunshot; the sparkle from the muzzle, and the sound cued the origin's source to them. 15 meters were almost just a big leap to them. The beast instinct urged them to detour so that Chang wouldn't have a second chance to fire.

While Chang was turning away, and the creatures were chasing after him, the thundering gunshot lit up the spider filled jungle. The dozing spiders were brought wide awake in the darkness. Their behaviors were bizarre. Instead of climbing down along their silk, they bounced among the webs, briskly making their way to their prey.

Chang had already known the consequences before ever fired his handgun, and hence, he made a 180 degree turn, digging his way into the center of the spider zone.

Number Two and Number Three weren't distracted by the spiders that were bouncing around them. They were a few times faster than Chang, but he didn't look back, sliding within the den and planning out every step he took before hand.

The gene-altered soldiers didn't sail through the spider webs as smooth as their target. They fumbled and stumbled around the webs. Even though they were capable of getting rid of the sticky webs, their speed was greatly reduced.

What was more, for every spider web they crashed into, the following vibration was sent out to the spiders that hung on the web. As if triggered, the spiders crawled over the broken webs, twitching their mouth pieces as if promising revenge on the gene-

altered soldiers.

Of course, not only the gene-altered soldiers were targeted. As one of the troublemakers, Chang was attacked by a few of the spiders, too.

The attack from the spiders was well-organized. It seemed like the group living style trained them to be group hunters. Their battled tactics weren't limited to pouncing and biting. The soft and sticky spider silk was ejected from the end of their abdomen so that the silk would stick on the invaders. As they also realized the lethality of these gene-altered soldiers, the majority of these spiders decided to swathe their prey from far away.

Streams of spider silk poured and rained on Number Two and Number Three.

Yet the gene-altered soldiers seemed not to care about these soft attacks. In their eyes, capturing the target was the priority. Other enemies, as well as their own lives, were placed second.

In this chasing game, Chang realised his calculation ability was a huge advantage in siege attacks.

Threads of spider silk showered him, but Chang was able to calculate where they would land according to their current location. The pouncing spiders were slower as they paused briefly between each bounce, and hence, Chang could find the best path to escape before the spiders encircled him.



Although the den of the spiders had expanded, as Chang ran further, the density of spider webs reduced. He dodged and strolled through the spider webs effortlessly. In comparison to his spry footwork, Number Two and Number Three seemed deeply troubled.

They jostled and elbowed around, though they tried dodging the showering spider silk, their reckless motions actually got more spider silk wrapped around them. For every spider web they crashed into, the broken web cloaked one more layer on them. With the additional spider webs poured over their heads, they soon were forced into a sticky spider silk coat. It was so tenacious that the gene-altered soldiers were prevented from moving forward.

Their struggle became slower over time as the layers grew thicker. Chang turned his head when he felt the time had come. He fired four consecutive shots toward Number Two and Number Three.

## Chapter 98: Seeing In The Dark

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The capacity of the cylinder was five bullets. Except for the one that Chang had fired for the headshot, the remaining four were all he had. He shot them all at once.

His decision came with reason—although the gene-altered soldiers were encumbered by the tenacious spider silk, it was still hard to aim for fatal injuries. Thus, in order to improve the damage dealt, he had to fire more shots.

Besides, the spiders over his head were also getting in the way of him shooting accurately.

Therefore, of these four shots, two were shot to prevent the soldiers from jostling. Although only the last two whacked them, the force of the bullets disrupted their ability to move—one thrust into Number Two's chest, the impact of the bullet fracturing his chest bone and resulting in a big hole in the center of his chest. He fell backward, pushed by the invisible force of the bullet. Number Three lost his balance due to the hit on his thigh and rolled, blown away by the handgun's great might.

The spiders acted out of instinct when they saw the gene-altered soldiers severely wounded. They bounced off of the webs more quickly, ejecting their silk on the gene-altered soldiers more intensively.

The first batch of the spiders were suicide squads since the gene-altered soldiers smashed them when they landed on their bodies.

However, the spiders were fearless. They continuously set foot on the mushy corpses of their brethren, leaving no room for the gene-altered soldiers to stand up.

Soon after, Number Two and Number Three were enveloped in “chrysalises”. Their strong physiques weren’t helping them in this situation anymore. They wriggled on the ground as if they were two unborn silkworm.

As the only witness of this brutal predation, Chang now understood why the millipede had roared resentfully before it died—its gigantic and brawny body would have been useless in this chrysalis. Death was the only fate for those caught in the spider silk.

The gene-altered soldiers were turtles in jars. Chang knew by heart that the spiders would torture them to death in all the ways they knew how.

Even though Chang had trapped his biggest enemies, he was still distressed.

He nimbly slaughtered the four arachnids that surrounded him and exited the den of the spiders. His first goal outside was to find the hooknosed woman, since as long as she was alive, there would be no peace for his mind.

The chasing game during the last few days had helped Chang to identify the person with the tracking ability. If he didn’t exterminate the woman this time, she would then bring more

special forces in her next pursuit.

In fact, Chang was blessed with good luck that he had escaped being annihilated. If he was to confront these super humans again, the odds might not in favor him like this time.

Thus, capturing the woman was his primary concern now. The troop was put to rout, and the gene-altered soldiers were imprisoned in the chrysalises. He must not let the leader flee back to the lab.

Chang returned the way he had come, but the woman was nowhere to be seen at the place where he had fired his gun. “She might have witnessed the gene-altered soldiers’ situation... Or she might have just smelled all of those things happening there,” Chang thought. “She is gone...”

Without hesitation, Chang sprang up to chase after the commander. To his amusement, he didn’t need to go far to find the woman. She didn’t take any action at all when she saw him. All because she was hopelessly stuck in the worst possible situation. She was stuck in a spider web.

“Hahaha, I was going to kill you, you know.”

The woman was stuck in a weird posture as the glutinous spider silk fixed one of her arms to the spider web. Chang looked around, knowing that the spiders wouldn’t come until they finished gnawing the gene-altered soldiers. He said, “It seems like it isn’t worth the effort to kill you, the spiders will help!”

Chang hated this woman, more than he had ever hated any other person in his life. Because of this hooknosed woman, Jing was captured, and he didn't even know if she was still alive or not. He was also forced into this jungle, constantly escaping from the jaws of death. Half of his face had collapsed thanks to the gene-altered soldiers, and it would never be the same even if he got it fixed. The woman had brought all of those disasters to his life, and he wished for her die in excruciating pain so that she would suffer like he had suffered.

As he spoke, Chang raised his leg. He thought of kicking the woman so that the spider silk would wrap tighter around her, and the vibration made would deliver a signal to the spiders to come for their meal.

But he reconsidered it. This was too cruel even though he wanted the worst possible fate for this woman. After all, she was merely an executor of Zhuo's evil plan. Plus, Chang could never forget about the other woman who he had relieved from pain with a bullet. He put down his foot, pulling out his dagger.

"Tell me where Jing is! If you do it, I'll let you die at ease." Chang put the blade against the woman's neck, saying, "Or the spiders will let you know what hell feels like. They won't kill you at first, but disable you with their venom! Then they will cut slits in your skin with their sharp mouthpieces to lay eggs in. When the eggs hatch, you will be the source of nutrient for their newborn babies. It is at that time that the effect of the disabling venom fades away. Those evil babies will nibble at your flesh bit by bit. By the time that happens, you will be regretting your decision not to answer me now."

“...” The woman swallowed, her mind in chaos because of Chang’s words.

“Don’t even try to bite off your tongue to commit suicide, I won’t let you do it. If you dare to attempt it, I’ll stuff your mouth and you’ll still die as I said you will.

“Now, hurry up and tell me where she is. The spiders are coming.” Chang listened carefully and heard the gene-altered soldiers screeching—it was a scream mixed with desperation and rage.

“Please, please don’t kill me. I can lead you to where she is.” Apparently the woman had heard the last roar as well. She quickly said, “I am the only person who knows where she is. Plus, I was a spy serving in the military, so I can tell you inside information. Even if you kill me, you have to know that I am not the only tracker working with Zhuo. He will just send someone else to pursue you. But if you keep me alive and let me join you, my ability will be able to aid you to backtrack them.”

The woman hurried her pleading as she noticed Chang’s hesitation, hastily saying again, “There is no reason for you to not believe me. I think you have heard about what kind of person Zhuo is. Do you think I’ll remain alive if I were to go back to report?”

The gene-altered soldiers released their last shriek, followed by a scream. Hundreds of spiders were dismissed from the battlefield. They once more bounced towards Chang and the hooknosed

woman.

“All right, you are indeed a good persuader. You got a lighter or something similar on you?” Their conversation was brief as some of the spiders began to enter Chang’s view range. “Hurry up! Do you have it or not?”

“No! I don’t smoke.” The woman saw the spiders bouncing over her head, and the shadows brought out a howl from her. “Do something, please! I don’t think a lighter would help at all.”

“Well then, we only have one solution.” Chang kicked over a spider with a back flip, raising his dagger and chopping off her forearm. Blood gushed out from the amputation site, and her forearm was left behind on the spider web forever. Chang lifted the woman and quickly ran away from the spider zone.

He kept on sprinting at his full speed to escape from the spiders. Because they could only bounce between spider webs, he wasn’t concerned that they would catch up with him. In fact, if he wasn’t in the den of the spiders, the chance of getting caught would be zero given their chasing speed. It would have also been impossible for them to swathe the gene-altered soldiers if they weren’t in their territory.

In Chang’s eyes, the spider webs were avoidable. Even if the terrain of the jungle was complicated, he found his own route using his calculation ability. He didn’t slow down even though he was carrying the woman with him. A moment later, he lost the spiders and headed towards Zhengzhou like he had done the first time.

Chang was much faster now than last time he had been in the jungle, so soon after, he crossed the edge of the jungle and returned to the city.

“Blood, blood...” The commander groaned in Chang’s arms. “Help me stop the bleeding, otherwise I’ll die...”

Glancing at her pale face, Chang put her on the ground, and ripped off a long piece of cloth from his shirt to tighten it around her upper arm to stop the blood from oozing out.

“This is the best I can do. You aren’t a weak EM, I think you’ll survive this.” Chang double-checked her amputated arm and said, “We’ll get Jing first, and after that, I’ll find you a doctor. Neither of us can stand for long with our injuries.”

Chang pointed at his bandaged face when he explained it to the woman.

The woman nodded, asking, “Jing, is this her name?”

“It is.” Chang too nodded. He stared at the murkiness of the sky with his single eye. “She is my family.”

“Are you an EM with mutated vision?” The woman looked at Chang.



“Not exactly.” Chang pulled her up from the ground, asking, “You are an olfactory EM, aren’t you?”

“I am,” the woman admitted. “My nose is a thousand times more sensitive than a normal human’s, I can easily track down anyone by their scent.”

“What’s your name?”

“Zhizhi He.”

“I thought your name would be more muscular, I didn’t expect such an elegant name.” Chang gently patted her back, chuckling. “Alright, we need to find Jing first. After that, we can talk.”

The woman was a person who understood the times, so she began guiding Chang with her nose.

They returned to the urban area. Although it was dark, Chang’s vision was still above 10 meters with one eye. He found that his night vision was better than before. Perhaps it was because he was using only one eye, or maybe due to the second evolution he had underwent. The realization cheered him up a bit, and this was the only finding that made him feel happy during the last few days. Following Zhizhi, he was led to an underground garage at a residential area he used to hide in. In front of the garage gate, he saw two soldiers standing guard.

“It’s here!” The woman pointed at the garage with her remaining

arm.

Nodding silently, Chang raised his palm and knocked out the woman.

He then reloaded his crossbow and his handgun, moving ahead stealthily.

Two bolts were shot at the guards' foreheads, and he managed to take them out with one bolt each. Chang picked up an assault rifle from one of the dead guards and fired towards the other ten soldiers in the garage.

He didn't stop until he ran out of bullets. He was sure that none of them had escaped from this sneak attack.

The gunshots had also wakened Jing. Her sleepy eyes saw a person soaked in blood and full of bandages slowly walking toward her.

"Let's go, we gotta leave here," the person with the horrifying appearance spoke. His voice was familiar and made her feel warm. Jing was lifted into his arms, and the person turned around and left the garage.

A note to readers: Zhizhi He, Zhizhi consisted of two identical Chinese characters, meaning tree branches or bamboo branches. It is supposed to be an elegant and girly name, but her personality is the opposite of her name.

# Chapter 99: The Face Of The Devil

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On the morning of the second day, in an abandoned house at the east outskirts of Zhengzhou.

Gently peeling off the “bandage” wrapped around Chang’s head, Dr. Huang revealed a badly mutilated face; his face bones were shattered. Dr. Huang spoke with pity evident in her voice, “I can’t treat this kind of damage.

“And I can’t treat hers, either.” Dr. Huang turned her head, pointing to the hooknosed commander, who was tied up in the corner. “The incision is too big to treat, the only thing I can do is sanitize the wound and staunch the bleeding. As for your face, half of the bones are gone. I am sorry that I am not capable of reconstructing your face.”

“Thank you Dr. Huang. It’s okay as long as I don’t die from it, I’m fine with disfigurement.” Chang wrapped his face again, saying, “I apologize for stealing you from the apartment at midnight.”

“No worries. But you did stun me with all the blood and injuries on you, especially by not saying anything about them and just taking me away from my place,” Dr. Huang said. “What kind of trouble did you get into? I remember there were quite a few soldiers that came to our community, they didn’t catch you?”

“My escape was a pure fluke. Look at her, she is the commander of that troop.” Chang pointed at Zhizhi. He then asked, “What if I

don't get treatment for my face, will this be a lethal wound?"

"I don't know, either. Chang, I've never treated a wound that is as severe as yours," Dr. Huang answered. "It is all about how well you can heal by yourself. I can give you an emergency treatment, but beyond that there is nothing I can do. Especially for your appearance. There is no way that I can restore it. Your bones were shattered, and I was just a family doctor before this apocalypse. I had never performed an orthopedic operation. This simply exceeds my capabilities."

"I see. Don't worry, I understand what you're saying." Chang gently stroked the intact side of his face and mocked himself, "I wasn't good looking anyways. Anyways, its better to have the bandage on than show my disfigured face to the others. Zhizhi, am I right?"

While speaking, he turned his head to the hooknosed woman.

"Why did you tie me up? I've told you that I won't go back to the military! I don't see how this is beneficial for our future cooperation." The hooknosed commander struggled on the ground, but the rope was secured tightly around her. "Where is your humanity? To badly treat a severely wounded person like me."

"Mr. Li told me that humanity is the most complicated thing in the world. Besides, I think tying you up is the most logical decision I ever made." Chang walked up to the woman, saying, "I don't fully trust you yet."

“Time will let them know the truth.” The woman smiled without further explaining herself.

“Great, I’ll loosen the rope if you answer my questions.” Chang squatted down in front of the woman, showing his index finger and asking, “First question, did Zhuo send you to capture me?”

“Yes, it is an absolute yes. He also commanded us to capture you alive.” Zhizhi nodded.

“Great. My second question is, how many trackers like you does the military own?” Chang put on a straight face when he threw out this question.

“There are two more. The first one is the same kind of EM like me, but his degree of evolution is lower than mine. I know that his olfactory cells are less sensitive. The other one is working in Group Beta, which is conducting a biological weapon research. This person isn’t a real EM, even though what he is capable of resembles the abilities of the cognitive category EMs. I think he is just smart. He is able to conduct analysis on footprints and figure out where the target went based on what the footprint looks like by deductive reasoning. But from what I’ve heard so far, this person belongs to the higher ups. His status is as high as Qing Shui’s in Group Alpha. I don’t think Zhuo could just simply order him to do the tracking work,” Zhizhi said, recalling what she knew.

“Do you remember what they smell like?”

“I do. I have seen them in the institute, I won’t forget any scent or odor I ever smelled.”

“That means...” Chang was speaking when he loosened the rope on Zhizhi. “I don’t need to worry about the military pursuing me anymore if I have you coming along.”

“Exactly. I am the best out of them. Even if the expert in deductive reasoning is sent off, I’ll sense him far in advance, so don’t worry.”

“Good to hear all this. And my last question is,” Chang became more serious when he was about to ask the last question, “how is Qing Shui doing in the research institute?”

“I don’t know much about the higher ups... But I feel like he is quite close with Zhuo. You see, they are the best and the smartest researchers in the institute, and they work together! They get most of the fundings for their projects, and I don’t think there will be another group which can surpass them in the near future. The higher ups in both the government and the military attach great importance to them, so I guess he is doing pretty well in there.”

“Good, good.” Chang turned away from the woman, nodding.

Since Zhizhi didn’t receive any more questions from Chang, she stood up with difficulty, pointing at her bandaged and amputated arm. “Doctor, my wound isn’t fatal, is it?”

“No, after all, humans are more than capable of self-healing these days, it’ll be fine,” Dr. Huang answered. “But it is impossible that you will have your arm grow out from the incision.”

“Well... Does that mean I am handicapped now?” Gazing at her own amputated arm, Zhizhi accepted the fact reluctantly. Her words were composed of sorrow and remorse.

“Come on, which one do you think is worse, disfigured face or amputated arm?” Chang looked at Zhizhi with a lonely eye. The bandage covered most of his face, leaving only his left eye out. “I look worse than frankenstein, and all of the suffering was caused by you.”

“Well...” Zhizhi scanned Chang’s face and lowered her head. She felt less pain after Chang said that. After all, when someone else was in greater suffering than you, you would oddly feel better.

They formed such a weird group under this strange atmosphere.

One was a former denouncer, and the other was a former enemy. It seemed like bitter hatred wasn’t harbored in anyone’s heart in the apocalypse. As long as they were alive, enemies could turn friends and partners.

Three days later.

The four went down to a new community that they were unfamiliar with. It was once more the food distribution time. They

had been staying here for two days now, and Chang's new occupation here was a security guard.

At dusk, Jing went to the distribution point to collect her and Chang's portion, then she walked back to their safe house.

"Chang, does your face feel better now?" Jing asked while handing some Crystal Pea to Chang.

"It got better, maybe. At least it isn't swollen anymore, but it is still painful. The good news is that I don't feel any strange sensations except for the pain." Chang lightly tapped on the bandage while replying to Jing. "Where is Zhizhi? Don't let her go too far away from us."

"I know." Jing sat down beside Chang. "You don't need to worry about this. She has been active in my sensing range. As soon as she exceeds that fifty-meter line, I'll let you know."

"Haha, thank you, Jing. I am pretty confident that she can't escape from me in that range." Chang's mind settled, he rested on the ground with his eye closed. A moment later, Dr. Huang and Zhizhi walked into the room with small bowls in their hands.

"Officer He." Chang grinned as the hooknosed woman walked up to him, but no one could see the smile on his disfigured face behind the bandage. "Could you please exchange these Crystal Pea with normal food with the other residents? Even though we might get less, if someone is willing to do so, please exchange them for me."



“You don’t eat Crystal Peas?” Zhizhi was puzzled, pouring all the Crystal Peas from the bowl into her mouth, chewing.

“No, I don’t”

“Then what did you eat before?”

“Worms. I called them rice worms because they had the shape and color of rice. But I lost the worm box when I fled from the first safehouse.” He continued by saying, “Do you remember the girl who I left behind in that apartment? I think she took it. The worms aren’t as gross as you might imagine, and Qing Shui said they are nutritious. I’ve been thinking about getting the worm box back.”

“Let’s get it back. It sounds delicious. I still remember her scent, so it won’t be difficult to find her.” Zhizhi was waving her amputated arm while speaking in excitement. “You need to share some of them with me if I find her.”

“Sure!” Chang agreed with Zhizhi, smiling. “Why do you like to wave your broken arm so frequently these days?”

“Oh come on, you’ve been touching you face as well!” Zhizhi shrugged. “I think it’s quite common that people pay more attention to their missing parts.”

“You’ve got a point.” Chang touched the bandage, it felt soft as jelly beneath the cloth and the sensation made him uncomfortable.

He missed his old face these days. Although he wasn't good looking before, his facial features were well organized. Now that half of the bones were missing, without the support of the bandage, his skin and muscle drooped.

He still remembered the day they had come to this community, and the residents were keeping him from entering the residential area. Although they accepted him later, none of the residents were willing to start a conversation with him. He was discriminated against because of his looks.

"Don't worry, Chang. We'll figure this out." Jing seemed to see through what he was thinking when he sunk into silence, and comforted him. "Let's wait until Mr. Li settles down, then we can go back to the institute. Mr. Li is capable of anything! A reconstruction operation shouldn't be hard for him at all. What if he makes you more handsome?"

"Hahaha..." Chang chuckled when he heard her comforting words. "I don't need to be more handsome, I just want my old face back."

"But you look just as good even when you're injured," Jing comforted him again.

"Gee, you guys are creepy," Zhizhi complained loudly, wrinkling her nose in disdain. "Your conversation sounded like those cheesy soap drama, but the age gap between you guys is larger than six years. Gross."

“Gross?” Chang squinted at Zhizhi. “Only a person with a dirty mind would think of our conversation in a dirty way. By the way, how old are you?”

“I’m twenty six,” Zhizhi answered, her eyes rolling from the left to the right. She then added, “I am not married yet!”

# Chapter 100: Barren For A Hundred Years

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“So you are eight years older than me.” Chang beamed at the hooknosed woman. “You have such a bright personality! If some other girls broke their arms, they would probably be sad for quite a long time... You recovered from it sooner than I thought you would.”

“Well, I grew up in the military, so my personality is quite similar to my guy friends from there. I still remember I used to beat up a lot of the boys in the military compound of where I grew up. I was actually a tyrant of a girl.” Zhizhi spoke, smoothing out her hair with her only hand. “You said that I’m your enemy, which I don’t agree to at all. I just happened to work under the regiment that happened to collude with Zhuo. You see, I’m just doing my work. I’m not loyal to Zhuo but the regiment, we shouldn’t even be enemies in the first place. Chang, is it fun to put so much effort in watching over me?”

“I just can’t trust you fully since we haven’t known each other for long enough, I hope you can understand,” Chang answered honestly.

“Whatever, I can’t return to the military, either. Anyways, did you hear about the rumor on the streets? It says that the military is planning to spray Agent Orange over the whole city,” Zhishi said. “I think it’s another of Zhuo’s ideas. If they use Agent Orange, which is a strong herbicide and defoliant, it will destroy most of the plants above ground. It is something that was used during the Vietnam War by the U.S army as well.”

“Agent Orange? U.S army?” Chang asked with puzzlement, frowning.

“Right, Agent Orange. The significant contaminant of it is the dioxin TCDD. TCDD is also the most toxic in the dioxin family, and is very effective in devastating leaves. But I doubt he is going to use the original formula of Agent Orange. Most likely he’ll reduce its concentration and add something else into it. Therefore, it’ll only devastate some specific plants instead of all of them.”

“Why would he do that?” Jing asked from where she sat on the side.

“He wants to change the living environment in which humans reside. And that’s why he’s been a left wing the whole time; he wants to manipulate the nature. The plants in the city are so full of vitality and strength that they damage power supply facilities and other infrastures.” Zhizhi articulated her speech. “I also read about Qing Shui’s Food Web Theory and know what kind of role plants are playing in the nature. Even though they are both predators and producers nowadays, but their most important role still lies in producing. Although they’re relatively safe to EMs like you, to ordinary humans, they are still harmful.

“If the majority of plants are removed, that means a great amount of producers will be eliminated. And hence, the bugs and small animals that live and lurk in urban plants will lose their source of food. The balance will be broken, and these residents will either go extinct or flee to the jungle, granting human an ideal place for living. I think that is what Zhuo is trying to achieve.”

“It sounds like good news,” Dr. Huang noted with a slow nod. “But I don’t think this plan is as perfect as it sounds like.”

“You’re right. TCDD is extremely toxic to plants, as well as humans.” Zhizhi then explained as if she was reciting from a textbook, “In the Vietnam War, the U.S army, who was exposed to and had contact with Agent Orange, suffered from a list of chronic diseases. Their offspring also had high rates of congenital defects. And I was only speaking about U.S veterans, not even touching on Vietnamese who had a longer exposure to Agent Orange.

“In fact, if you go to the zone where they executed the operation ‘Ranch Hand’, there are still tons of deformed and fester-skinned children.”

“Has the military approved this proposal? Did they consider the aftereffects?” Chang was stunned by Zhuo’s insane plan. “And the Crystal Pea he made for the public... Is he trying to exterminate the whole city?”

“Perhaps the military thinks that sacrifices are necessary in order to save more people.” Zhizhi sneered. “Or they don’t care about human lives at all, reconstructing the infrastructure is more important to them. No matter which, the military has already released the information to the public. We can’t do anything but watch and listen.”

“You’re right. Well.. For now, whatever you told me might just be idle fears, and as you said, we can’t do anything about it.” Chang held the small bowl with Crystal Pea in front of his face. He said, “Just like the Crystal Pea, we only have a vague idea about its

possible harmful effects. As to what the Agent Orange might really do, we have nothing to stop it.”

Once he finished his words, he walked into the crowd at the food distribution station, holding the bowl to try and exchange the Pea for something else.

In the morning of the second day.

Zhizhi was sleeping soundly when Chang came to wake her up. He took Jing in his arms and left with Zhizhi, leaving Dr. Huang alone in the room. They had two goals today: first, they were going to retake his worm box, and second, they were going to check out if the rumor was true.

The trio walked out of the community. In less than ten minutes on the street, they found a line of soldiers carrying sprayers on their backs and spraying the liquid from the containers onto the plants on the ground.

Chang kindly asked Jing and Zhizhi to stay still, and then he went up to the soldiers at a quick pace. Although he was still a pursued target of the military, his current face wasn't known to any military personnel except for Zhizhi. Even if his parents met him now, he doubted they would recognize him with all the bandages.

He walked up to the soldiers openly, inquiring, “Excuse me, what are you doing..?”

Chang wasn't given a chance to finish his question when the soldiers got frightened by his bandage-wrapped face. "Stay where you are! Are you infected or something with your head wrapped like that?"

"We aren't discriminating against you but you know everything is dangerous nowadays. We don't want to get infected by chance. So just stay where you are and ask your question from over there."

"Sure." Chang stopped, nodding.

He had been treated like this for a few days already and learned not to care about what other people thought. Chang stood two meters away from the soldiers. "What are you spraying? Defoliant?"

"Yes, it was an order. We're spraying this in the city so that they won't grow back again for a hundred years."

"A hundred years?" Chang was greatly astonished.

"According to Chief Zhao's instructions, he said that he urgently needed to transform Zhengzhou. Chief Zhao also said that the new defoliant we are using is harmful to the plants but will only minimally affect humans. The field that we spray the solution on today will be barren for a hundred years. Except for the fields that are cultivated for the Crystal Pea, they all need to be sprayed so that the apocalyptic city will be transformed soon. Didn't you hear about it before?"



“Not at all, I didn’t go out in the last two days so I had no idea of what was going on.”

“Alright, now that you know it, go away. We don’t have time to talk to you, we’re still working.”

“Thank you for letting me know, good day.” Chang bowed and left.

When he returned to Jing and Zhizhi with a smile, he relayed the information that he’d heard from the soldiers. He sighed. “Barren for a hundred years, what a tough and vicious guy he is!”

“Only the fittest will survive the natural selection, he really thinks of himself as the creator.”

“Nevermind... We are too powerless to change anything, they can do whatever they want because at the end of the day we’ll all die.” Zhizhi heaved a sigh, walked by herself to the front. “We don’t have time thinking about their evil plans for now. Our mission today is to retrieve the worm box from that teenage girl.”

Chang’s mind was brought back by her words, and he held Jing’s hand while following Zhizhi.

Their destination was a kindergarten. Its first character was purple, and the rest were concealed by lush vines. However, knowing the name wouldn’t help them in this mission, thus, they took no notice of the doorplate and jumped over the closed gate.

“Our target is here...” Zhizhi said after taking a deep breath in the middle of the courtyard. “There are sixteen more people in here besides the girl that we’re looking for. Twelve teens and four adults.”

“You can even smell how old they are?” Chang stared at Zhizhi in stunned disbelief.

“People of different ages smell differently, so do men and women. The adults are all male,” Zhizhi calmly explained.

“What a nose!” Chang gave her a thumbs up and prowled to the front of a classroom.

The classroom was modified into a residence. Five beds were horizontally aligned at the center of the room. The student desks and chairs were jumbled against the wall, while beds were pushed side by side in a long row. On this long bed, thirteen teen girls were lying either in black pantyhoses or naked. One man was snuggled up with one of them, snoring, while the other three were humping with their own partners, enjoying the last bit of ecstasy in the apocalypse.

Chang kicked open the door with great force, crashing into this smutty yet sensual scene.

“You’ve really found a way to enjoy your lives.” Chang squinted with his only eye. From his place at the door, he shouted back at his companion, “Jing! Don’t come in here!”

“Who are you?” Those men let go of their girls when they saw Chang break in. They were vigilant, standing up nude to face him.

As they stood up, Chang realized something unusual. One of them seemed exceptionally strong and tall. He was so muscular that he looked like a mutated vigorous hound, while his height reached almost two meters.

“There is also an EM in the city...” Chang turned his head to face the outside of the classroom and asked, “What’s their index?”